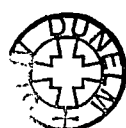


# Popular styles, local interpretations: Rethinking the sociology of youth culture and popular music

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## **Thesis Abstract**

### **Popular styles, local interpretations: Rethinking the sociology of youth culture and popular music.**

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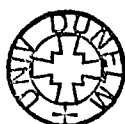
In the course of this study, I am concerned to rethink some of the theoretical concepts which currently underpin sociological analyses of youth culture and popular music. In doing so, I posit a new approach to the analysis and interpretation of youth and popular music, and the relationship which exists between the latter. Central to this approach is the contention that manifestations of music-driven youth style are locally bound. Thus, I argue, in choosing particular musical and stylistic resources, young people simultaneously 'rework' such resources in ways that articulate local themes and issues, that is to say, themes and issues which are encountered in the context of day to day experience.

The study is divided into two parts. In the first part I critically evaluate the major sociological studies on youth culture and popular music to have emerged during the last thirty years. At the same time, I also lay the theoretical groundwork for my own approach to the study of youth and popular music, setting out in detail the conceptual elements central to the localisation thesis which I explore in this study. In part two of the study I present an extended ethnography. During the course of four separate ethnographic fieldwork chapters, I consider different aspects of the localisation process as these relate to the uses of four different popular music genres - urban dance, bhangra, hip hop and progressive rock - in the context of a specific urban setting, Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England (apart from chapter five which presents a comparative study of representations of hip hop 'authenticity' in Newcastle and Frankfurt am Main, Germany). This is followed by a concluding chapter in which I summarise the ways in which each of the ethnographic studies serves to substantiate the localisation thesis posited in this study.



Thanks to my supervisor, Professor David Chaney, for his help and support during the preparation of this thesis. Thanks also to my parents for their love and encouragement, and to Moni for being so wonderfully patient and understanding. Finally, thank you to the many young people in Newcastle and Frankfurt without whose generous co-operation much of this thesis could never have been written.

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## Introduction

The close relationship of youth and style with the medium of popular music has been a perennial feature of social life, in the modern social context at least, since the post-war period. Beginning with the advent of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and its assimilation into the gang culture of the USA and the teddy boy culture of Britain, a succession of music-driven youth styles have appeared and faded, occasionally re-emerging for brief periods in the form of revivalist movements. The ubiquitous phenomena of youth and pop have attracted much attention, not least of all from sociologists. Indeed, accounts of contemporary youth and popular music form a major part of the current sociological discourse. This said, however, the study of youth and pop is an aspect of sociological concern in which the lines of division are only too clear and this has much to do with the differing chronologies of youth culture and popular music as 'respectable' aspects of academic pursuit. Even as late as the mid-1970s, popular music, which by this time had made a considerable impact upon many aspects of social life, was seldom taken seriously by sociologists, who, as Frith points out, were "still ignoring music in their accounts of the mass media" (1983, p.3). By contrast the study of youth culture was already an established sociological concern in the 1950s (see, for example Whyte's (1955) Street Corner Society). As a consequence of this, the sociologies of youth culture and popular music have evolved largely independently of each other.

It would be erroneous to suggest that contemporary theorists of youth have been oblivious to the impact of popular music upon contemporary youth, but their accounts have tended to focus upon the manifestations of style which have accompanied each new musical trend, rather than the music itself. Similarly, popular music theorists, while not completely ignoring young audiences, have concentrated mainly upon the production and performance of popular music rather than its social reception. Moreover, in those studies which have paid greater attention to the consumption of popular music, there has been a wholesale assumption that the meanings which audiences read into particular texts and genres can be interpreted simply by analysing the lyrical content of songs or the stage image of performers. At the same time, studies of youth culture have also become increasingly narrative in their approach, abandoning the tradition of ethnographic work, established by Whyte and other Chicago theorists. Within the sociologies of youth culture and popular music then, there is currently a parallel tendency on the part of theorists to do young people's talking for them.

In this study I have been concerned to do two things. Firstly, I attempt to collapse the division between youth culture and popular music studies and to create a new approach in which the relationship between youth and popular music is seen as a form of sociological study in itself. Secondly, I have rejected the narrative approach which holds sway in the sociologies of youth culture and popular music and have actively sought the views and opinions of young people themselves in my attempts to interpret the social significance of popular music for young audiences. This, however, has not been done at the expense of any form of theoretical discourse. On the contrary, the grounding assumption throughout this study is that if young people construct their own forms of meaning and 'authenticity' around the popular music styles, then they do this in a way which articulates those themes and issues that they encounter on a day to day basis, that is, those themes and issues which are particular to the cities or regions in which they live.

The study is divided into two parts. In part one I review the existing sociological literature on youth culture and popular music and also establish the theoretical tenets via which I pursue my own analysis. Chapter one is concerned primarily with the sociology of youth culture. In the course of this chapter, I take issue with the forms of essentialist theorising which have dominated the sociological study of youth. I am particularly critical of subcultural theory, which, I argue, in positing a structuralist interpretation of post-war youth style, has effectively granted sociologists licence to construct a grand narrative of post war youth culture in which the voices of young people themselves are never heard. Subsequently, I offer a new approach for the understanding of youth style in which I suggest that the stylistic innovations of contemporary youth are the product of the reflexive lifestyle sensibilities which characterise modern consumer society, rather than an indicator of the continuing prevalence of social structure in determining the actions of young people.

In chapter two, I turn my attention to the sociology of popular music. In reviewing the principle studies to have emerged within this area of sociological study, I illustrate a similar failing in the latter to move beyond the realms of theoretical abstraction in their discussions of the social significance of popular music. In the final part of chapter two, I begin to develop the central thesis of this study, arguing that sociologists, in their attempts to gain an understanding of popular music's significance for those who consume it, must be prepared to accept that musical meanings cannot be interpreted simply by studying texts or issues of production and performance, but are to some extent bound up with the lifestyle choices of

individuals, such choices in turn reflecting the lived experiences and 'local' knowledges of those individuals.

In part two of the study I illustrate in detail the relationship which exists between youth, locality and the social construction of musical meaning by presenting four separate ethnographies, each dealing with a specific genre and the collective sensibilities which are inscribed within it by individuals in a particular social context, Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England (with the exception of chapter five which also draws upon fieldwork conducted in Frankfurt am Main, Germany). Chapter three considers the social significance of contemporary urban dance musics, such as *house*, *techno* and *jungle*, for groups of urban dance music enthusiasts in Newcastle. Through interviews and discussions with such enthusiasts, I illustrate how urban dance music is used to articulate a particular form of underground sensibility as those who consume it struggle against statutory and cultural institutions in Newcastle to win space for themselves and their music. In chapter four I examine the social significance of the Asian dance music *bhangra* in Newcastle. In doing so, I demonstrate the highly complex web of meanings which have become attached to bhangra, young Asians in Newcastle using bhangra to articulate a variety of statements concerning their ethnicity and the various racisms which they encounter in the city.

Chapter five pursues a somewhat different line of enquiry, presenting a cross-cultural analysis of hip hop's local significance in Newcastle and in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. In looking at the differing ways in which the genre is used in these cities and the differing representations of hip hop authenticity which are constructed even within the same local setting, I illustrate more forcefully the need for sociologists to take account of the local circumstances in which popular music is appropriated and which subsequently frame its use as a form of cultural expression. At the same time, chapter five challenges the essentialism of much of the current sociological work on hip hop in which it is routinely assumed that the genre's cultural significance remains rooted in its function as a form of Afro-American street culture. In chapter six, the last of my ethnographic studies, I turn my attention to the issue of music-making among young people in an attempt to show how this activity too can lead to the construction of highly localised meanings around popular music genres. Following the live performances of a young North East Pink Floyd 'tribute' band, the Benwell Floyd, I illustrate how the kinship and friendship bonds which exist between band and audience, together with the celebrations of regional identity which are an integral part of each Benwell

Floyd appearance, ensure that the progressive rock music of Pink Floyd assumes highly particularised forms of local significance in the context of a Benwell Floyd performance.

Finally, in the extended concluding chapter I draw the main points raised in each of the ethnographic chapters together, demonstrating succinctly how each chapter contributes in its own way to the localisation thesis raised at the beginning of this study. I then go on to suggest how such locally articulated manifestations of music and style may be understood as a social process. In doing so, I draw upon and modify Raymond Williams's concept of a *structure of feeling*.

## Part I

### Theories of youth culture and popular music

## **Chapter 1**

### **From resistance to disappearance: The sociology of youth culture**

This chapter is divided into two sections. In section one I present a review of the sociology of youth culture as this has developed over the last twenty-five years. In tracing this development I will look first at the concept of subcultural theory. Having outlined the latter's origins in the USA as a sociological framework for the study of juvenile delinquency I will then go on to chart its incorporation into British sociology and subsequent modification and application by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) as an analytical tool for the study and interpretation of the so-called British post-war youth subcultures as pockets of working class resistance. This will be followed by a review of the studies which succeeded the CCCS work and were concerned to rethink or to refute certain aspects of its approach. In the final part of section one I will consider some of the more recent literature on youth culture, a series of studies which reflect, in varying degrees, the increasing influence of postmodernism within the fields of sociology and cultural studies.

Because much of the work discussed here forms part of an ongoing debate within the sociology of youth culture, it will be possible to outline certain problematic issues associated with the literature in the course of the review. However, it will not be possible to engage in any in-depth discussion of such problems at this point as this would interrupt the contextual flow of the review section. Thus, in section two I will retrace my steps to some extent in order to look more closely at certain *outstanding and unresolved problematic issues which I identify in the literature*. In my view, many of the problems arising in the sociology of youth culture result from the discipline's continuing reliance upon themes and perspectives associated with subcultural theory. In section two then, I will begin by addressing what I consider to be the fundamental flaws in subcultural theory before going on to sketch out an alternative approach to the sociological study of youth.

#### **The development of subcultural theory**

The concept of subculture, as this has been employed in British subcultural theory, was derived from a model first developed by the American 'Chicago' School of sociology during the 1920s and 30s. The Chicago theorists wanted to construct a *sociological* model of juvenile delinquency as an alternative to the individualist

criminological accounts which held sway at this time. In the years following World War Two, the sociological interpretation of juvenile delinquency became increasingly popular when it was discovered that post-war affluence and prosperity were not, as expected, resulting in a decreasing crime rate and a higher level of social integration. On the contrary, in addition to rising rates of economically motivated crime, there was also a significant increase in deviant forms of crime such as “gang-based youth violence (and) new types of drug use” (Chaney: 1994, p.37).

It was argued by the Chicago School that these and other forms of juvenile delinquency, when studied within their cultural context, could be shown to be “*normal*, that is determined by cultural norms, and not a symptom of psychological deficiency” (Frith: 1984, p.40). Moreover, it was further argued that youth deviance was a form of collective behaviour organised around the normative structures of delinquent *subcultures* (ibid.). It was also suggested that such ‘collective’ deviant behaviour was staged as part of a rationalised and reasoned response to certain aspects of the subculture’s social experience.

Becker (1963) argued that deviant behaviour is the product of social *labelling*; that “social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those rules to particular persons and labelling them as outsiders”(p.9). Delinquent subcultures, according to Becker, become locked early in their careers into a process of deviance amplification in which the initial negative responses of dominant norm producing institutions, such as the police and the mass media, result in such subcultures committing further acts of deviance which in turn reinforces the stigmatisation conferred upon them by the dominant society.

Merton (1957), in contrast, suggested that deviance is a solution for those groups who lack the socially prescribed means to the material and cultural rewards but who nevertheless desire such rewards. Thus, according to Merton, delinquent subcultures are deviant in their means but conformist in terms of their desired ends. Matza and Sykes (1961), on the other hand, contest the notion that subcultures will in every case resort to some form of delinquent activity. They argue that it is also possible to speak in terms of *legitimate* subcultures whose codes of *subterranean* values, while deviant in as much as they offer non-conformist routes to pleasure and excitement, do not challenge the socio-economic order of the dominant society as such.

This latter interpretation of subcultures is to some degree evident in the approach utilised by British sociologist Willis in his study Learning to Labour (1977). In this study Willis follows the progress of a group of working class boys, the 'Lads', during their final two years of comprehensive education and their first year in employment. During this time, the 'Lads' participate in, what Willis terms, a *counter-school culture*, employing a strategy of subterranean values in order to subvert the school system, rejecting the educational demands of the conventional academic syllabus in favour of "having a laugh" (p.29). According to Willis, however, the *counter-school culture* is essentially paradoxical in that, while within the school's frame of reference such behaviour is clearly deviant, it simultaneously mediates to the 'Lads' those working class cultural values which prepare them "for the manual giving of their labour power" (ibid., p.3). Thus, in a wider social sense, the subterranean values of the *counter-school culture* helps to sustain the system of class relations upon which capitalist society and its mode of production depend.

Early attempts by British subcultural theorists to study the youth subcultures of post-war Britain also drew partly upon American frameworks of explanation. Stanley Cohen's Folk Devil's and Moral Panics (1972), a study of the mods and rockers, employs Becker's theory of labelling in its examination of the way in which the British media's treatment of this subcultural phenomenon served to sensitise sections of the general public to alleged threat of violence and unrest which the mods and rockers were deemed to pose while simultaneously alerting agents of social control to the need for vigilance and 'special' measures of law enforcement (p.77, 91-2). According to Cohen, in addition to helping to establish the pattern of societal reaction, the media was also instrumental in reinforcing the mods and rockers' deviant self-image. Thus, writes Cohen, "youths were asked in TV interviews about their plans for the next Bank Holiday and interviews were printed with either a Mod or a Rocker threatening revenge next 'time'" (ibid., p.39).

Cohen's observations regarding the significance of the moral panic in the shaping of public opinion in relation to youth and aspects of youthful behaviour have provided the basis for a number of subsequent studies.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the media's portrayal of recent youth based phenomena such as acid house or new age travellers serves to reinforce Cohen's assertions regarding the centrality of the 'folk devil' in the manufacture of news.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Hall and Critcher et al. (1978).



This said, however, Cohen was himself aware that much had been left out of his study. In his “Introduction to the New Edition” of Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1987), he wrote of the original edition: “Influenced by labelling theory, I wanted to study reaction; the actors themselves just flitted across the screen” (p.iii). Cohen’s attempt here to redress the balance of his original work can, in many respects, also be read as a response to the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, whose approach dominated British subcultural theory during the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The CCCS argued that the deviant behaviour of subcultures had to be understood not as the product of societal reaction but as the collective reaction of youth themselves, or rather of sections of working class youth, to certain structural changes which characterised British post-war society.

### The CCCS tradition

The significance of the CCCS approach lies in its application of a structuralist Marxist perspective to the study of youth subcultures. Influenced by the ‘new criminology’ of the late 1960s, which argued that crime could be interpreted as a direct result of class conflict, the CCCS posited that such an interpretation could also be applied to youth subcultures. Hall and Jefferson’s (eds.) Resistance Through Rituals (1976), the centrepiece of the CCCS’s work on youth culture, combines this explanatory model with a sophisticated critique of the ‘classless society’ thesis and the effect that post-war affluence was deemed to be having upon British youth.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it was argued that, far from signifying post-war youth’s assimilation into a unified teenage consumer culture, the newly emerging subcultures, while indeed indicative of the newly acquired spending habits of working class youth, also symbolised a series of responses on the part of working class youth to the socio-economic conditions of their class position.

The notion of subcultures as a collective symbolic response to the conditions of class was adopted from an earlier CCCS working paper, Phil Cohen’s “Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community” (1972). According to Cohen, the nature and function of youth subcultures were to be understood in terms of their facilitating a collective response to the break up of traditional working class communities. Cohen suggests that the urban re-development and slum clearance programmes in the east end of London during the 1950s, together with the re-

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Cohen is highly critical of the CCCS’s approach. Some of his observations will be taken up in my own critical review of subcultural theory in section two of this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> For an extended study of post-war affluence and the classless society thesis, see Zweig (1961).

location of families to 'new towns' and modern housing estates, culminated in an irreparable rupturing of traditional working class ways of life as these families struggled to come to terms with the loss of former working class communities and their various support structures, while at the same time attempting to integrate into a new environment and new patterns of existence (p.14). Subcultures, argues Cohen, were an attempt on the part of working class youth to bridge the gap between life on the new estates and the former patterns of traditional working class community life:

It seems to me that the latent function of subculture is this - to express and resolve, albeit 'magically', the contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved in the parent culture ... (each subculture attempts) to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in their parent culture and to combine these with other class fractions symbolising one or other of the options confronting it (ibid., p.23).

While Cohen's concept of 'magical recovery' is acknowledged and developed in Resistance Through Rituals it is, however, posited as purely one of a number of themes around which subcultural responses are constructed. Subcultures are seen to form part of an on-going working class struggle for cultural space which, in the case of post-war working class youth, became sub-divided into a range of highly visible and differentiated responses. The reading of subcultures which informs the approach of Resistance Through Rituals is heavily indebted to the Gramscian concept of ideological hegemony. The latter suggests that "history is a process of conflicts and compromises where one fundamental class will emerge as both dominant and directive not only in economic but also in moral and intellectual terms" (Bennett, Martin, Mercer and Woollacott (eds.):1987, p.199). However, while the state, under the direction of the dominant class, functions "as the unifier and arbitrator of diverse interests and conflicts" it is unable to ever resolve the struggles occurring within the social structure in absolute terms (ibid.). Following Gramsci's argument, the CCCS suggest that : "The subordinate class brings to this 'Theatre of Struggle' a repertoire of strategies and responses - ways of coping as well as of resisting" (Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts: 1976, p.44).

In terms of post-war working class youth, it is argued, the range of possible strategies for resistance was widened considerably due to the economic boom and the range of new cultural resources which this made available to youth. Moreover, while such new consumer sensibilities are seen to have generated a number of tensions within the working class, notably the way in which they served to

“fetishise ... the meaning of leisure for the young”, thus challenging “parent culture orientations towards the privileged meaning of ‘free time’”, certain subcultural sensibilities, it is argued, continue to reflect characteristic parent culture values (ibid., pp.50-51, 53).

Subsequent working papers contained within Resistance Through Rituals examine the various relationships which are seen to exist between subcultural style and traditional working class parent culture values. Jefferson, in his study of teddy boys, describes the ted style as a direct reflection of their “‘all-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go’ experience of Saturday evening”(1976, p.48). The relative affluence of the teddy boys allowed them to ‘buy into’ an upper class image - the Edwardian suit revived by a group of Saville Row tailors in 1950 and originally intended for an upper class market. According to Jefferson, however, this upwardly mobile dress sense did nothing to improve the life chances of the teddy boy as such. Thus, he argues, the teddy boys’ “dress represented a symbolic way of expressing and negotiating with their symbolic reality; of giving cultural meaning to their social plight” (ibid., p.86).

Similarly, Clarke argues that the subcultural style of the skinhead “represents an attempt to re-create through the ‘mob’ the traditional working class community as a substitution for the real decline of the latter.” (1976, p.99). It is further suggested that the skinheads’ adopted image, consisting of “boots ... short jeans and shaved hair ... resonated with and articulated skinhead conceptions of masculinity, ‘hardness’ and ‘working-classness’”(ibid., p.56). Hebdige, in discussing the subcultural significance of the mod style, suggests that the latter was very much a reaction to the mundaneness and predictability of the working week. Thus, argues Hebdige, “the mod was determined to compensate for his relatively low position in the daytime status - stakes over which he had no control, by exercising complete domination over his private estate - his appearance and choice of leisure pursuits” (1976a, p.91).

According to the CCCS, the essence of such style-centred resistance depends very much upon the goodness of fit or ‘homology’ between the object of consumption - which in this case could be, for example, a particular type of jacket or pair of shoes - and the range of values or concerns which it is intended to represent. The issue of homology is addressed extensively by Willis in his study Profane Culture (1978) which develops the theoretical tenets of his earlier CCCS working paper “The Motorbike within a Subcultural Group” (1972). According to Willis homology does not simply describe the re-working of an object to express

collective values but also encapsulates “the continuous play between the group and a particular item which produces specific styles, meanings, contents and forms of consciousness” (1978, p.191).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the motorbike is argued to feed into and express the male centred values of the motorbike gang at a number of levels. Primarily, argues Willis, the mechanical features of the motorbike correspond with certain features of the group themselves:

The solidity, responsiveness, inevitableness (sic), the *strength* of the motorbike matched the concrete, secure nature of the bikeboys’ world ... (Its) roughness and intimidation ... the surprise of its fierce acceleration, the aggressive thumping of the unbaffled exhaust, matches and symbolizes the masculine assertiveness, the rough camaraderie ... of (the gang’s) style of social interaction (ibid., p. 53).

In addition to the motorbike’s perceived centrality to the physical profile of the motorbike boys, Willis also stresses its significance in opening up a range of experiential sensibilities which also feed into and inform collective notions such as the quest for freedom, recklessness and the outlaw or renegade persona which is integral to the image of the motorbike boys:

At high speeds, the whole body is blown backwards: it was a common way of communicating speed among the boys to say ‘I was nearly blown off’ ... For the bike boy, he is in the ‘world out there’ and copes with handling his motorbike, at the same time as feeling the brunt of its movement in the natural physical world (ibid., pp.54, 56).

According to Willis, the homological relationship formed between objects and collective group values is part of the process which gives such groups a stake in the real world. Thus, he argues: “Having posited itself, shown its existence, manifested an identity in concrete worldly items, the social group has a degree of conscious and unconscious security” (ibid., p. 4).

A somewhat different reading of style is offered by Hebdige in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979). Hebdige takes issue with the notion of style as homology, arguing that the latter’s central assumption “of a transparent relation between sign and referent, signification and reality” is oversimplistic (p.118).

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<sup>4</sup> The problems associated with Willis’s usage of homology will be taken up in the second part of this chapter.

According to Hebdige, the problems associated with homology became increasingly apparent with the advent of punk whose “primary value and appeal . . . derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit” (ibid., p.117). Hebdige subsequently attempts to substantiate this view by arguing that:

The punk style remains elusive. Instead of arriving at the point where we can begin to make sense of the style, we have reached the very place where meaning itself evaporates . . . Any attempt at extracting a final set of meanings from the seemingly endless, often apparently random, play of signifiers in evidence here seems doomed to failure (ibid.).

It is then argued by Hebdige that, in order to interpret the significance of punk style, homology must be abandoned in favour of *signifying practice*. Adopted by Hebdige from the French *Tel Quel* group, signifying practice relates to the way in which an object or text is seen to generate not one but a range of meanings.<sup>5</sup> Although the *Tel Quel* group applied this mode of interpretation primarily to literature and film, Hebdige argues that the group’s “polemical insistence that art represents the triumph of process over fixity, disruption over unity, ‘collision’ over ‘linkage’” is mirrored in punk’s “spectacular transformations . . . of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc.” on the site of the body (ibid., pp.119, 116).

Objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in the punks’ ensembles: lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests encased in plastic bin-liners. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic ‘utility’ context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip . . . T-shirts and trousers told the story of their own construction with multiple zips and outside seams clearly displayed (ibid., 107).

If Hebdige’s interpretation of the significance of subcultural style marks a considerable departure from earlier CCCS studies, then the youthful sensibilities which, he argues, inform such style are also differently defined:

There is no reason to suppose that subcultures spontaneously affirm only those *blocked* ‘readings’ excluded from the airwaves and the newspapers (consciousness of subordinate status, a conflict model of society etc.). They also articulate to a greater or lesser extent some of the preferred meanings and

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<sup>5</sup> *Tel Quel* was a French Literary magazine, established by novelist Sollers in 1960, which became influential upon the development of structuralism and semiotics during the 1960s.

interpretations, those favoured by and transmitted through the authorised channels of mass communication. The typical members of a working-class youth culture in part contest and in part agree with the dominant definitions of who and what they are, and there is a substantial amount of shared ideological ground not only between them and the adult working-class culture . . . but also between them and the dominant culture (at least in its more democratic', accessible forms) (ibid., p.86).

Hebdige then goes on to argue that a central aspect of punk's "success . . . as spectacle" was the way in which it was able to translate the general mood of late 70s Britain into "tangible (and visible) terms" (ibid., p.87). According to Hebdige, by "*dramatizing*" the media's "rhetoric of crisis" the punk subculture made statements which were understood not only by its members but also, more importantly, by "its opponents" (ibid.). The expressions of outrage and disgust which punk elicited from parents, teachers and employers, and from the "moral entrepreneurs", argues Hebdige, simply served to reinforce the fact that, while the subculture's particular mode of expression was far from commonly endorsed, it was, nevertheless, "cast in a language which was generally available" (ibid., pp.88-87).

The work of Hebdige and of other CCCS theorists has been criticised on a number of grounds. Some of these criticisms will be considered in a moment, while in the next section of this chapter I go on to offer my own critique of the CCCS and of the general concept of subcultural theory. Perhaps one of the most salient criticisms of subcultural theory among established sociologists of youth culture has come from a writer who was herself formerly associated with the CCCS. In "Girls and Subcultures" (1976), the only study in Resistance Through Rituals to make any consideration of the relationship of girls to youth subcultures, McRobbie and co-writer Garber argued that the relative absence of girls in subcultural groupings could be attributed to the stricter parental control and regulation of girls' leisure time. It was further argued that, because of this, "girls find alternative strategies to that of the boys' sub-cultures"; that a "Teen Bopper" culture is constructed around the territory available to girls, the home and the bedroom (p.219). Just as male subcultures are 'serviced' by consumerism, it is argued, a similar range of consumer goods is made readily available to young female teen boppers. Therein, however, lies the essential difference between subcultures and teen bopper culture, as, according to McRobbie and Garber: "The small, structured and highly manufactured space that is available for ten to fifteen year old girls to create

a personal and autonomous area seems to be offered only on the understanding that these strategies also symbolise a future general subordination - as well as a present one" (ibid., p.221).

McRobbie attributes the failure of subcultural theory to acknowledge both this home-centred teeny bopper culture and its long term implications for girls to the selective bias of the researchers themselves. In a further study, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique" (1980), she points out that

... while the sociologies of deviance and youth were blooming in the early seventies the sociology of the family was everybody's least favourite option ... few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a week-end on speed. Only what happened out there on the streets mattered (pp.68-69).

Such indifference to familial and domestic issues on the part of the subcultural theorists, McRobbie argues, was largely due to the nature of their own socio-political backgrounds. Many of them gravitated to sociological research from left-wing political groups, the student movement and the counter culture, each of which propagated such pre-women's movement notions as the need to escape the essentially restrictive institutions of "the family, the bourgeois commitments of children and the whole sphere of family consumption" (ibid., p.69).

According to McRobbie, however, in the study of youth, the family is an important point of reference. Taking Willis's Learning to Labour as her example, McRobbie argues that in positing the 'Lads' *counter - school culture* as an example of cultural reproduction, Willis entirely overlooks the extent to which such cultural reproduction is also tied into domestic and familial networks:

The family is the obverse face of hard, working-class culture, the softer sphere in which fathers, sons and boyfriends expect to be, and are, emotionally serviced ... Willis's emphasis on the cohesion of the tight-knit groups tends to blind us to the ways that the lads' immersion in and expression of working-class culture also takes place outside the public sphere. It happens as much around the breakfast table and in the bedroom as in the school and the workplace (ibid., p.71).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a similar critique of American subcultural analysis, see Breines (1992).

## Beyond the CCCS

Apart from the canon of theory established by the CCCS a number of other writers have also contributed to the study of youth culture, in many cases challenging the theoretical position of the latter. Perhaps the most notable of such theorists is Simon Frith, aspects of whose work are also discussed in chapter two. In fairness, Frith has, for the most part, tended to concentrate upon the area of popular music studies. Nevertheless, this has necessarily involved Frith in his own analysis of youth. Indeed, Frith's interpretation of youth subcultures is substantially different from that proffered by the CCCS theorists. Thus, he argues, one of the central problems with the CCCS approach lies in the "romantic" and "political" assumptions which it makes about subcultures. Frith takes issue with notion of style as signifying "the moment of symbolic refusal" in the "act of symbolic creation" adding:

The problem is to reconcile adolescence and subculture. Most working-class teenagers pass through groups, change identities, play their leisure roles for fun; other differences between them - sex, occupation, family - are much more significant than distinctions of style. For every youth "stylist" committed to a cult as a full-time creative task, there are hundreds of working-class kids who grow up in a loose membership of several groups and run with a variety of gangs. There's a distinction here between a vanguard and a mass, between uses of leisure *within* subcultures (1983, pp.219-220).

Such an argument is clearly critical of the CCCS's notion of tight coherent subcultures, suggesting alternatively that such groups may infact be characterised by a series of floating memberships and fluid boundaries. A similar position is taken by Jenkins in his study Lads, Citizens and Ordinary Kids (1983). Like Frith, Jenkins is critical of the fact that subcultural theory not only tends to overlook the essentially interconnected nature of so-called subcultures but also regards such groups as ideologically separated off from the wider society. Thus, he argues, "the concept of subculture tends to exclude from consideration the large area of commonality between subcultures, however defined, and implies a determinate and often deviant relationship to a national dominant culture" (p.41).

At this point, however, Jenkins extends the ambit of his critical position on subcultural theory far beyond that assumed by Frith. Indeed, of all the work discussed here, Jenkins's offers perhaps the most sophisticated and advanced



critique of subcultural theory. According to Jenkins, 'subculture' is an authorial construct which, although superimposed upon working class youth from above, has quickly gained credence as an accepted epistemological tool for the study and interpretation of the latter's action as a form of "stylistically bizarre, misrecognised working-class resistance to modernising capitalism" (ibid.). Jenkins further argues that if relatively accurate accounts of social life are to be acquired via the method of social research, then equal emphasis must be placed upon what he terms "folk models", mobilised by the actors themselves, and corresponding "analytical models" mobilised by social scientists:

An objectivist epistemology insists that not only is there an objective reality, but that actors' accounts, folk models, are necessarily 'false knowledge', and that objective reality may only be apprehended in the analytical models of 'scientific' practice . . . What I am saying is that analytical models and folk models must be accorded epistemological equality, there is no difference between the two in terms of their objectivity or subjectivity: they are both models of people and things in their relationship with each other, formulated, however, by different kinds of people in different situations (ibid., p. 10).

Accordingly, Jenkins rejects the concept of 'subculture' choosing instead to employ the term 'lifestyle' in his own work. 'Lifestyle', he suggests, is more suited than 'subculture' as an analytical framework for the study of youth as it allows for the formation of distinct social practices while at the same time acknowledging the wider set of common cultural practices within which such alternative collective strategies are played out. Jenkins further argues that such an approach "may also allow the discussion of changing youth life-styles . . . to be integrated with a discussion of more stable, generalised class life-styles" (ibid., pp. 41-42). I shall return to Jenkins's work in the second part of this chapter when I begin to sketch out my own theoretical framework for the study of contemporary youth.

Other theorists, while perhaps not directly challenging the theoretical premises of subcultural theory in such a way, have also opened up new issues for consideration in the study of youth. Brake's Comparative Youth Culture (1985), for example, although cast very much in the CCCS mould, does, nevertheless, take the important step of studying youth culture in a comparative international context. Apart from responding to an obvious gap in the existing literature, Brake's study also sheds light upon another fundamental drawback in subcultural theory, and one

which I shall return to in section two, the failure to acknowledge the substantial influence of local circumstances and resources upon the collective activity of youth. Thus, for example, in discussing youth culture in Canada, Brake points out that:

If there is a tradition of resistance in Canadian youth culture, it is at an individualistic rather than a collective level. The vast size of the country acts against any distinct yet common themes, as in the folk devil traditions of Britain, or the specific ethnically developed subcultures in America ... Further, at a more banal level, the long and severe winter which covers most of Canada localises youth cultures to the cities, and even there public spaces tend to be shopping malls, which do little to generate collective gatherings and are easy to control (p.145).

### **The break-up of the CCCS tradition (?)**

By the mid 1980s many theorists began to argue that the sociology of youth culture had become, to use Phil Cohen's words, "simply the site of a multiplicity of conflicting discourses ... (with) no reality outside its representation" (1986, p.20). Consequently, this period is generally associated with the abandonment of the CCCS approach, in the light of the realisation that the application of structuralist theory to the study of youth had caused it to "become radically disconnected from young people themselves" (Pilkington: 1994, p.36). Indeed, many of the youth culture studies published from the mid 1980s onwards appeared to move increasingly away from the class based, structuralist explanations of the CCCS and to formulate new approaches to the study of youth. By the same token, however, it could also be argued that other studies which emerged during the mid 1980s demonstrated a continuing concern with CCCS ideologies, or more precisely, with adapting the CCCS approach to fit in with the socio-economic character of 1980s Britain.

This thematical division can best be demonstrated by referring to two studies published during the mid 1980s, Chambers's Urban Rhythms (1985) and Cashmore's No Future (1984). While both studies place considerable emphasis upon the central significance of consumerism for youth, there is a marked difference in how each writer interprets this significance. In common with the CCCS, Chambers suggests that one of the most important effects of the youth market was in its widening the definition of leisure so that this no longer

constituted merely “a moment of rest and recuperation from work, the particular zone of the family concerns and private edification” (p.16). Unlike the CCCS, however, Chambers does not attempt to read the new forms of leisure made available to youth via the youth market as accentuating issues of class and class consciousness, but is concerned rather with the way in which consumerism opened up to youth new possibilities for autonomous creativity. Thus, he argues: “To buy a particular record, to choose a jacket or skirt cut to a particular fashion, to mediate carefully on the colour of your shoes is to open the door onto an actively constructed style of living” (ibid.). According to Chambers then, the appeal of consumerism lay in the power which it gave the young to construct alternative lifestyles which could be lived out in and around the traditional class based social institutions such as the family, the school and the workplace: “In contrast to the anonymous drudgery of the working week, selected consumer objects provide the possibility of moving beyond the colourless walls of routine into the bright environs of an imaginary state” (ibid., p.17).

Cashmore’s treatment of consumerism, on the other hand, relies upon a more familiar mode of interpretation. Cashmore begins by arguing that youth, having become accustomed to consumption as an integral and deeply symbolic aspect of everyday life was, as a consequence of the 1980s recession, suddenly denied this medium of expression. He then goes on to suggest, combining a CCCS-style resistance thesis with a Mertonian interpretation of deviance, that the resulting “disjuncture between the goals of consumption and the channels through which such goals can be achieved” was a contributing factor in the onset of the inner city riots of 1980 and 1981 in which youths battled with police and looted shops, seizing consumer items such as fashion clothes, records and stereo equipment (1984, pp.81-86, 90). Arguably then, Cashmore’s study is in many ways little more than an attempt to re-work the CCCS’s notion of subcultural resistance into the context of the 1980s. According to Cashmore, working class youth, whose striving for a means of expression was previously realised via the consumer items appropriated from the youth market, must, in the face of the economic austerity of the 1980s, resort to a form of quasi revolution simply to gain access to such items.

Towards the end of the 1980s and during the early 1990s, a new paradigm of academic thought, postmodernism, began to influence theorists within a range of disciplines. Paramount in postmodern theorising is a rejection of dominant discourse, a position which is supported by the view that such hitherto accepted criteria for studying the world must now be reinterpreted as a series of competing,

parallel representations of reality limited both by time and culture. Postmodernism has had a marked influence on the direction which the sociology of youth culture has taken since the early 1990s, in some cases prompting theorists to abandon the study of youth altogether. In other cases it has encouraged studies which, following on from Chambers, have concentrated upon developing theories of youth as creative, autonomous actors, actively involved in the modification and recontextualisation of cultural resources to fit in with particularised and localised patterns of living. Arguably, however, even within the more recent postmodernist work, the legacy of the CCCS remains, with certain theorists couching their 'postmodernist' arguments within thinly masked CCCS style structuralist frameworks.

### Postmodernism and youth cultural studies

One of the first youth culture theorists to endorse the principles of postmodern analysis was Hebdige in Hiding in the Light (1988), a study in which the author sets out, in a spectacular theoretical 'about face', to bid his "farewell to youth studies" (p.8). Strongly influenced by postmodernism's de-centralisation of the dominant discourse, Hebdige argues in the opening chapters of Hiding in the Light that youth studies has become a redundant project; that the pursuit of quintessential and universally valid accounts of youth, or indeed of any other social group or phenomenon has become an essentially pointless exercise. "Mistaken Identities" is a metaphorical essay in which Hebdige, in recalling the death of former Sex Pistol Sid Vicious, also pays analytical homage to "the passing of the 'moment' of the punk 'subculture' and the model of subcultural negation and 'resistance' which informed an earlier phase in my own work" (ibid.).<sup>7</sup> Hebdige adds: "The lesson I draw from this triple obituary is that theoretical models are as tied to their own times as the human bodies that produce them. The idea of subculture-as-negation grew up alongside punk, remained inextricably linked to it and died when it died" (ibid.).

As with Hebdige, Willis's more recent work also signals a rejection of the theoretical principles which influenced his earlier studies. In Willis's case, however, this has resulted not in an abandonment of the youth studies project but rather in a shift away from his original concern with structuralism to focus alternatively upon the creative autonomy of youth. Common Culture (1990) centres upon the ways in which youth, through a process of symbolic creativity

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<sup>7</sup> See Hebdige (1988, pp.37-41).

which Willis refers to as 'grounded aesthetics', appropriates, re-defines and particularises the "raw materials" of cultural life, of communications and expressions" (pp. 21,20). Grounded aesthetics, writes Willis, "are the specifically creative and dynamic moments of the whole process of cultural life" (ibid., p.22). Willis's new found optimism for mass culture and its perceived liberating effect upon the individual leads him to further suggest that: "If it ever existed at all, the old 'mass' has been culturally emancipated into popularly differentiated cultural citizens through exposure to a widened circle of commodity relations. These things have supplied a much widened range of symbolic resources for the development and emancipation of everyday culture" (ibid., p.18). Although Willis himself takes issue with postmodernism, suggesting that it is "singularly ill-equipped to catch (the) potentials of everyday cultural response and symbolic production in cultural modernization", his emphasis upon the active and creative roles of consumers is clearly linked to the principles of postmodernist analysis. Indeed, Willis's acknowledgement in Common Culture of the ways in which cultural materials are appropriated and transformed into particularised local resources, has a number of important implications for the study of youth, some of which will be taken up and considered in later stages of my work.

McRobbie's venture into postmodernist analysis, Postmodernism and Popular Culture (1994) is more problematic. Initially, McRobbie pursues a similar line of argument to that of Willis, suggesting that the creative autonomy of the consumer is at present largely ignored in postmodern analysis. Unlike Willis, however, McRobbie does not attribute this to the nature of postmodernism itself but to the way in which the latter is typically applied in the study of social life. According to McRobbie, postmodernism is currently an incomplete theoretical project which, having loosened objects and images from the delimiting cultural and historical locations within which they were formerly studied and theorised, has yet to embark on what is perhaps the more crucial task of illustrating the ways in which 'free floating' cultural materials are being continually re-appropriated and re-articulated within a variety of parallel and overlapping social and cultural contexts. Thus, she argues

...the interest in consumerism ...has led to an extrapolation of cultural objects out of the context of their usefulness (or their materiality); they have been prized away from their place in history and from their role in social relations, and have been posited in a kind of vacuum of aesthetic pleasure and

personal style. The lived experience which breathes life into such inanimate objects is noticeable by its absence (p.27).

According to McRobbie this problem can only be redressed by recontextualising consumerism within the “practices of everyday life” which in turn necessitates “a return to the phenomenological field” (ibid.). Herein, however, lies the essential problem with McRobbie’s study. In addition to the fact that her ‘return’ to the field involves McRobbie in little more than the form of “quasi-ethnographic research style” which characterises much of the CCCS work, her accounts of youthful consumerism are framed within a broadly similar style of structuralist trope (Chaney: 1994, p.39). As with Cashmore, McRobbie’s study often appears to be a thinly masked attempt to move subcultural theory forward with the times. This is perhaps best evidenced by her interpretation of the rag trade’s ‘retro-style’ marketing as a form of ‘subcultural entrepreneurship’ (p. 143). Despite McRobbie’s apparent care not to engage in the form of ‘over-romanticised’ narrative for which she criticises the CCCS, this is, nevertheless, at times also evident in her own work. Thus, for example, it is argued at one stage that while the products of ‘mainstream’ fashion labels, such as Laura Ashley, are indicative of the adult world’s loss of “faith in the future (and) ‘mass flight into nostalgia’ ... secondhand-style ... is marked out rather by a knowingness, a wilful anarchy and an irrepressible optimism, as indicated by the colour, exaggeration, humour and disavowal of the conventions of adult dress” (ibid., 147-148).

Equally problematic are two recent studies published by the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture, Redhead’s The End-of-the-Century Party (1990) and the same author’s edited collection Rave Off (1993). Both of these studies are concerned with the so-called ‘post-subculture’ generation, a term which is now being employed in an attempt to account for the eclecticism which is increasingly seen to inform the fashion and musical tastes of contemporary youth.<sup>8</sup> In certain respects the work of Redhead makes some well formulated and pertinent criticisms of the CCCS work. In particular the latter’s promotion of a linear concept of subcultural development is taken to task. Thus, as Redhead observes, in the CCCS studies: “Youth subcultures and counter-cultures appear as having succeeded each other over a forty-year period since 1945 ... Subsequent revivals, for instance, of teds, mods, skins, hippies, and greasers, failed to disrupt the

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<sup>8</sup> The term post-subculture generation and the problems which I identify with it will be discussed in section two of this chapter.

impression that what stood out in this evolution of post-war youth styles was *continuity rather than circularity*" (1990, p.24).

Redhead, also appears to object to the way in which the more loosely defined post-punk styles of the 80s and 90s have been accepted by some theorists as "*the sign of postmodernity*", when, according to Redhead: "Pastiche is ever-present in pop history" (1990, pp.75, 94). The problem is, however, that while Redhead and the other Manchester theorists offer some valid observations regarding the flaws which they identify, both in subcultural theory and in the current postmodernist accounts of youth, *their own position is never satisfactorily clarified*. Indeed their work often appears confused, seemingly occupying a tenuous middle ground in which postmodern theorising is combined with a continuing reliance upon the analytical models and terminologies associated with subcultural theory. Thus, in what is itself an apparently contradictory and confused passage Redhead (1990) argues:

What, in practice, we witnessed in the 1980s was not the break-up not simply of former theoretical traditions (or master and meta-narratives) about the emancipatory potential of youth in the West, but the disintegration and restructuring of those formations (rock culture) which were produced as their object. 'Authentic' subcultures were produced by subcultural theories, not the other way around. (1990, p.25).

This analytical confusion is carried to its logical conclusion by Melechi - one of the contributors to Rave Off - who, in attempting to explain the 'politics of disappearance' which he associates with the sensibilities of acid house, resorts to a form of analytical explanation which, despite several modifications, is essentially a 90s style re-run of the approach employed in Resistance Through Rituals. Thus, according to Melechi:

While subcultural refusals have been traditionally effected through the statement of self-expression and the display of alternative identity, Acid House has relinquished this ground and returns to the experience of tourism, where the self is lost in the 'unculture of the hyperreal'. This strategy of resistance to the scene of identity necessitates an escape from the (media) gaze, as, unlike previous subcultures . . . a whole subculture attempts to vanish (1993, p.38).

In the above review I have considered some of the key texts to have emerged from the sociology of youth culture since the early 1970s. In doing so, some measure of critical thought has already been necessary in order to both draw the various studies together into a contextual whole and to demonstrate the nature of the intertextual debate which has informed and continues to inform the study of youth. However, such critical comment has been kept to a minimum in order that priority could be given over to a consideration of the main theoretical issues to have emerged from this body of work. A point which should, however, by now be clear to the reader is that, apart from a few notable exceptions, the sociology of youth culture continues to draw heavily upon the central tenets of subcultural theory. Arguably, this is also true of those studies which have been to some extent critical of the CCCS approach. While certain writers have been concerned to challenge aspects of the CCCS framework, the notion of the youth subculture remains standard fare in most studies of youth. Thus, in the following section, I will offer my own critique of subcultural theory and question its usefulness for our understanding of youth in modern consumer society.

### **Problematic issues in subcultural theory**

As has already been demonstrated, in the case of the CCCS and much of the other British sociological work which has focussed upon contemporary youth, there is a grounding pre-supposition that post-war youth subcultures are a class based phenomenon, that they correspond directly to the structural changes which occurred within post-war British society. This approach, however, generates a number of problems. In this section, I want both to indicate what these problems are and to suggest the possibility of an alternative, non-structuralist approach to the study of youth.

The first and perhaps most crucial problem associated with the approach of subcultural theory is that, in emphasising the role of consumerism as a platform for the expression of working class youth, it attempts to provide structuralist accounts of what are, in effect, non-structural matters at least in so far as the term 'structure' is taken to infer the notion of structural determinism. The argument which is generally put forward by subcultural theorists is that, with the rise of the post-war teenage consumer market, youth gained a new status, that in becoming a distinct consumer group, youth also became a distinct age group, acquiring for the



first time its own social and cultural identity.<sup>9</sup> This assertion is in itself unproblematic, as is the observation that working class youth, the social group with the largest amounts of disposable income, became the first “specifically targeted and differentiated consumers”, middle-class teenagers tending still at this time to be “constrained in their spending” (Bocock: 1993, p.22) (Benson: 1994, p.165).

More problematic, however, is the interpretation which subcultural theorists then attempt to ‘graft’ on to these new sensibilities of working class youth. I have noted above how Chambers regards consumerism as constituting a break with traditional class based identities, due to the fact that spending power facilitates and encourages experimentation with new, self-constructed forms of identity “beyond the colourless walls of routine” (1985, p.16). A similar view is taken by Abercrombie who argues that: “Modern consumption ...is built around fantasizing and daydreaming. Modern people speculate, fantasize, think about, dream about what they are to consume. They form images of what they want to be, what they want to experience, which will be brought about by a purchase or an act of consumption” (1994, p.50).

Such arguments suggest that modern consumerism, rather than serving to underpin the structural features of the social order, allows for the creation of new forms of social identity which are lived out independently of such features. In subcultural theory, however, such non-structural characteristics of consumerism are ignored. Patterns of consumerism and the stylistic preferences of youth are simply torn away from their grounding in issues of fashion consciousness and personal taste and theorised as a series of ‘ritualistic’ responses to structural issues such as the break up of the traditional working class way of life or the influx of immigrant settlers into working class districts.

The contradictions in this approach become increasingly evident with the attempt to include later stylistic innovations, which were clearly not instigated purely by working class youth, into the ‘resistance’ thesis. Thus, for example, in Hebdige’s (1979) analysis of punk, there is a distinct air of contradiction between, what Gary Clarke has termed, its “metropolitan centeredness (sic)” and the emphasis on “working class creativity” (1981, p.86). As Clarke goes on to point out “most of the punk creations which are discussed (by Hebdige) were developed among the art-school avant-garde, rather than emanating ‘from the dance halls and housing

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<sup>9</sup> In recent years some theorists have questioned this accepted time frame, arguing that youth was already a distinct consumer group before the onset of the Second World War. See, for example, Fowler (1992).

estates'"(ibid.). Clearly, it is possible to argue that certain working class followers of punk did, in fact, articulate their allegiance to this style in terms of a response to the perceived contradictions of working class life. Such a usage, however, must be read, in the same way as the range of other possible meanings which a particular style may assume for those who appropriate it, as the active decision of individuals rather than the influence of structural conditions.

This, however, is precisely what subcultural theory fails, or, more precisely, refuses to do. Central to subcultural theory is, what could be termed, its structuralist disinterest in the perceptions of actors themselves, underpinned by the belief "that social relations are structured in particular ways and operate in part 'behind men's backs'" (Chaney: 1994, p.22). As I have just demonstrated, however, the problem is that in using consumerism as a focus for the investigation of such issues, subcultural theorists are attempting to reconcile what are, in effect, two incompatible projects. This is perhaps best observed in Willis's Profane Culture (1978). In the first instance, the reader is presented with an ethnographic account of how the lifestyle choices and consumption patterns of the motorbike boys reflect their sense of attachment and loyalty to the gang. Subsequently, however, Willis presents an independent homological reading of the gang in which he argues that the lifestyle 'choices' of its members are actually determined by the structures which underpin their perceived social reality. The resulting contradiction which arises from Willis's attempt to 'bolt' this homological reading onto his ethnographic study is neatly summed up by Harris who argues that:

... (homology) has become famous as an account of how particular items reflect the structured concerns and typical feelings of a group, as, say, the black leather jacket does for bikers. Each homology arises from an 'integral' process of selection and cultural work on an object or item, in a complex dialectical way, naturally. As a result, current members of a group are not subjectively aware of these structural meanings, embedded in the history of the black leather jacket in previous cycles of provision, transformation and resistance (1992, p.90).

A similar range of problems relates to Hebdige's treatment of style in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), except that in this case such problems are complicated due to Hebdige's reliance upon terminology borrowed from the art world. Hebdige's main argument is that whereas previous subcultural readings have applied homology as a means of making sense of the stylistic innovations of

subcultures, such innovations are in fact irreducible to such fixed levels of meaning. Hebdige's solution to this, the replacing of homology with polysemy, is, however, is no less satisfactory, for as Stanley Cohen rightly observes, polysemy "may work for art, but not equally well for life. The danger is of getting lost in the forest of symbols" (1987, p.xvi). In what is arguably one of the most well formulated and telling criticisms of subcultural theory, Cohen then goes on to discuss Hebdige's polysemic reading of the swastika's significance for punk. Thus, argues Cohen, according to Hebdige:

Displaying a swastika shows how symbols are stripped from their natural context, exploited for empty effect, displayed through mockery, distancing, irony, parody, inversion . . . But how are we to know this? We are never told much about the 'thing': when, how, where, by whom or in what context it is worn. We do not know what, if any, difference exists between indigenous and sociological explanations (ibid., p.xvii).

While clearly raising a number of pertinent points, from the point of view of Hebdige's theoretical position, criticisms such as Cohen's are simply grist to the mill. It is not that Hebdige becomes lost in the forest of symbols but rather that he has no intention of venturing outside it. For Hebdige the "problem of intent" is an issue beyond the perceptions and explanations of the social actors themselves and only ascertainable via the application of a polysemic reading (ibid.). This observation is borne out in the conclusion of Subculture where Hebdige himself freely admits: "It is highly unlikely . . . that the members of any of the subcultures described in this book would recognise themselves reflected here" (ibid., p.139).

Indeed, in Hebdige's case, this disinterest in the perceptions of the actors is particularly manifest. In a series of what McRobbie refers to as "semi-sociological streams of consciousness", youth styles are entirely divorced from any sense of what might be termed their *lived-outness* and portrayed as works of art, particularly punk, which Hebdige describes as displaying "the entire sartorial history of post-war subcultures in 'cut up' form" on the surface of the body (1980, p.72) (1979, p.26). This preoccupation with stylistic innovations as works of art rather than as cultural resources actively used and reworked by young people results in Hebdige formulating the spurious concept of the *authentic* subculture. Utilising a further analogy derived from the practical aesthetics of the art world, the perceived distinction between *high* and *low* art, and drawing upon the respective notions of 'authenticity' and 'commercialisation' implied within these

terms, Hebdige argues that subcultures remain objects of 'authentic' expression only as long as they remain undiscovered by the market. For Hebdige, the point at which a subculture becomes appropriated by the market it is simultaneously stripped of its cultural message and becomes simply another meaningless object of mass consumption (p.96).

To begin with, such a contention involves a fabricated distinction between stylistic innovation and the youth market, the two being regarded by Hebdige as mutually exclusive despite his own observation that, in punk's case, "the media's sighting of punk style virtually coincided with the discovery or invention of punk deviance" (1979, p.93).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, given that certain styles do originate at 'street level', such an approach automatically closes off any consideration of the regional variations and local levels of significance which such styles acquire once they have become commercially available. Indeed, this failure to take into account regional variations in style is a common one among subcultural theorists and includes those who do not share the same views as Hebdige. It seems to me, however, that this apparent 'oversight' is simply another attempt to mask the inconsistencies and contradictions which are inherent in subcultural theory.

In addressing this noticeable omission, Waters has argued that "geographical specificity is a factor in subcultural studies that cannot be overlooked" and goes on to suggest that such "works need to tone down their stress on the universality of subcultures, and make a concerted effort to focus on ... regional subcultures" (1981, p.32). It could, however, be argued that what Waters and others perceive to be simply an oversight on the part of subcultural theorists - a gap in the research which simply needs to be attended to - is in fact nothing of the kind. If subcultural theorists were to attempt to deal with regional variations in style this would further complicate the problem of trying to reconcile structuralism with issues of consumption. In concentrating upon a specific locality it is much easier to gloss over the various inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in the approach of subcultural theory. Thus, for example, by restricting the field of study to an East London working class district, the coincidental occurrence of a stylistic innovation,

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<sup>10</sup> A recent study by Cagle (1995) also takes issue with Hebdige's 'incorporation thesis'. However, it is not the theoretical validity of the notion of incorporation which Cagle challenges but rather "Hebdige's view that ideological/commercial incorporation *always* operates in such a manner so as to usurp the power of subcultural style" (p.41). As such, Cagle's study simply serves to replicate Hebdige's crude assumption that youth styles in each case originate as 'pure' street forms and are subsequently appropriated by the youth market, without considering the role played by the youth market itself in the production of style.

such as the teddy boy's suit, with structural changes, such as slum clearance or the increasing presence of immigrant workers, and the choice of certain white working class youth groups to adopt the 'ted' image, can be *made* to fit together so that the style appears to be an organised response, a symbolic defence of working class space. If the scope of the study were broadened to include other areas, which were not subject to the same sorts of structural changes, but where the teddy boy style was also prevalent, such inferences would be much harder to maintain. Clearly then, accounts of regional variations in style would serve merely to reinforce the point previously raised above, that the same styles elicit a varying range of cultural responses. More importantly, such an approach would demonstrate the influence of locality and local knowledges in shaping the lifestyle sensibilities of youth and emphasise the point that, if anything, collective statements of style are staged in response to situations encountered in particular localities and are thus irreducible to the forms of essentialist structural explanations employed in subcultural theory.

Having considered some of the problems which I identify with subcultural theory, I want now to examine the term 'subculture' itself, which, I would argue is also problematic. As should be evident from the literature review in part one of this chapter, time and time again subcultures are presented as 'things' which are 'out there' with tangible qualities. In his own critique of subcultural theory, Michael Clarke has suggested that the 'spongy' nature of the word *culture* makes it very useful "in the hands of an expert" (1974, p.428). Indeed, it seems to me, that once the various weaknesses and contradictions which characterise subcultural theory have been considered, the concept of subculture appears to be simply a convenient vehicle around which to frame structuralist arguments, an attempt to fuse a series of spurious arguments together into a coherent whole. I have already discussed Jenkins's reservations concerning the application of subculture to the study of youth and would agree with his contention that the latter is simply an authorial construct which is too far removed from the lived experiences of youth to be of any use as an analytical model.

That subculture continues to be something of a taken for granted concept in sociology is due largely to the fact that most theorists of youth culture - exceptions have been duly noted here - simply accept without question the structuralist premise which underlies subcultural theory. This, also applies to those studies which have been more critical of the CCCS approach. Thus, for example, Murdock and McCron have argued that one of the key problems with subcultural

theory is that it starts “by taking those groups who are already card-carrying members of a subculture ...and (works) backwards to uncover their class location” (1976, p.25). If such an analytical process were to be reversed, they argue, starting with the class base rather than the cultural response, then the fact of a common class base eliciting a range of differentiated cultural responses would be obviated. Similarly, Gary Clarke has argued that “elements of youth culture (music dancing, clothes etc.)” are in fact enjoyed and engaged in by the vast majority of youth and not merely by “the fully paid up members of subcultures” (1981, p.83). To begin with, such criticisms do little more than reiterate observations which the CCCS theorists themselves are seen to make. Moreover, these arguments arrive, as did the CCCS, at the problematic conclusion that there exists two types of working class youth, the ‘straight’, whose tastes in music and style, although never properly explained, appear to be the product of autonomous consumer choice, and the member of the subculture whose tastes, although serviced by the same consumption and leisure outlets, are somehow differently acquired, or rather in his (and less commonly her) case dictated, via the structural forces which underpin working class life. Such arguments, then, are merely critical of the way in which subculture has been applied in the study of youth and do not attempt to question the theoretical validity of the term itself.

Fine and Kleinman have argued that the attempt to reify a construct such as subculture “as a corpus of knowledge may be heuristically valuable, until one begins to give this corpus physical properties” (1979, p.6). The obvious inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in such a project, the clumsy attempts to impose structurally based categories of identification over free wheeling issues such as leisure and stylistic preference are apparent even in the original CCCS work. In what proves to be the first of a series of ‘qualifying’ comments in Resistance Through Rituals, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts claim that: “The great majority of working-class youth never enters a tight coherent subculture at all. Individuals may, in their personal life careers, move in and out of one or indeed several, such subcultures” (1976, p.16). If, as the CCCS maintain, subcultures are structurally determined one might expect that involvement with them would be rather less fleeting and arbitrary. Arguably then, this early admission of floating memberships and fluid boundaries as a central characteristic of subcultures is indicative of the CCCS’s realisation that the collective sensibilities of style which it attempts to read as instances of working class resistance are, in reality, rather more loosely defined and sporadic than those aspects of social life which are generally accepted to be class based. Hence Clarke et al.’s further

observation that subcultures “may be less significant than what most young people do most of the time” (*ibid.*).

### **Lifestyle: A non-structuralist approach to the study of youth**

I began this section of the chapter by suggesting that the fundamental problem with subcultural theory relates to its attempt to provide a structuralist account of matters which are irreducible to structuralist explanations. In this respect subculture too is seen to be a flawed concept. Variations in the uses of and significance placed upon commodities and upon the appearances, experiences and events which these commodities help to shape cannot be said to indicate the presence of a subculture. Differing levels of personal commitment to fashion and music led activities cannot be satisfactorily explained as marking out the responses of a ‘straight’ or conformist youth from a ‘subcultural’ youth. Rather, the difference between such orientations in youth leisure patterns must be understood in terms of ‘lifestyle’ choices.

Two recent studies on youth, Johansson and Miegel (1992) and Reimer (1995), have attempted to rethink the relationship between youth and popular culture using the concept of ‘lifestyles’. Problematically, however, each of these studies relies heavily upon Bourdieu’s (1991) interpretation of lifestyles and in particular the latter’s grounding notion of *habitus*. Bourdieu posited the notion of *habitus* as a way of attempting to allow for the fact of individual autonomy in modern society while at the same time insisting upon the continuing role of social structure in determining the nature and overall orientation of individual lifestyles. Thus, he argues: “The *habitus* is the source of (a) series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention” (p.73). As Jenkins points out, however, in attempting to reconcile structuralism with the notion of individual creativity in this way, Bourdieu simply replaces one form of structured determinism with another. Thus, according to Jenkins: “Although he (Bourdieu) starts out by rejecting the ‘false choice’ between objectivism and subjectivism, the relationship which he eventually posits between ‘objective’ structures the *habitus* and practice becomes one of determination: structures produce culture, which generates practice, which reproduces structures, and so on” (1983, p.5).

I have already made reference to Jenkins’s work in part one of this chapter and have noted there how his theoretical treatment of lifestyles, involving as it does a

sophisticated departure from the crude structuralism of subcultural theory, will serve in part as a basis for my own theoretical approach to the study of youth. This said, however, there is at the same time a considerable measure of difference between the lifestyle model which Jenkins employs and the one which I intend to use here. Jenkins is concerned primarily with moving away from the notion of the subculture as a closed system and to demonstrate the continuities and interactions which link the various groupings of youth present within a given social setting. I would argue, therefore, that in Jenkins's work subculture is retained as a conceptual blueprint in that his use of the term *group* continues to imply something relatively fixed and with a discernible membership.

In the lifestyle model which I wish to develop here, the notions of 'group' and 'individual identity' and the modes of relationship within which they interlock are significantly modified. Indeed, as I have previously pointed out, even within the original CCCS subcultural studies, the theoretical gloss of the work is occasionally prized open via jarring references to 'fluid subcultural boundaries' and 'overlapping memberships'. Such concepts, I would argue, while posited in an attempt cover up the inconsistencies inherent in the notion of a 'tight coherent subculture', more properly describe a series of situational encounters in which individuals, directed by their lifestyle choices, continually engage and disengage with a variety of different interest groups. Shields writes of a "postmodern 'persona'" which moves between a succession of "site-specific" 'gatherings' and whose "multiple identifications form a *dramatis personae* - a self which can no longer be simplistically theorized as unified" (1992a, p.16). From this point of view, the group is no longer a central focus for the individual but rather one of a series of foci or 'sites' within which the individual can live out a selected, temporal role or identity before relocating to an alternative site and assuming another identity. It follows then, that the term *group* can also no longer be regarded as having a necessarily permanent or tangible quality, the characteristics, visibility and lifespan of a group being wholly dependent upon the particular forms of interaction which it is used to stage.

Clearly, there is a considerable amount of difference between this definition of group and that which prefigures subcultural theory. Indeed, the term *group*, as it is referred to here is much closer to Maffesoli's concept of *tribus* (tribes), a concept which several contemporary theorists, including Shields, have adopted and which is also sometimes referred to as neo-tribalism.<sup>11</sup> As I will go on to consider

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Heatherington (1992).



in more detail during chapter three, Maffesoli's use of the term 'tribe' is considerably different from its more orthodox anthropological application. Similarly, the concept of *tribus* should not be linked with the 'romanticised' primitivism which informed the tribal references of the hippie movement and which has again become prevalent among the current neo-Greenist movements and in contemporary urban dance music. In the work of Maffesoli, the term 'tribe' is used to describe contemporary social groupings, which, Maffesoli argues, are driven by the lifestyle choices of individuals and are thus becoming increasingly unstable and arbitrary. Thus, according to Maffesoli, the tribe "is without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar; it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and 'form'" (1996, p.98).<sup>12</sup> A similar reading of contemporary social life, and one which illuminates considerably the temporal qualities identified by Maffesoli, is expressed in Schmalenbach's (1977) theory of *Bünde* (bonds or 'ties'). Shields, who adopts Schmalenbach's theory in his own work suggests that *Bünde* are

... short-lived flashes of sociality whose only sanction against their members is exclusion if and when their interests change from those of the group. Membership is thus short term and even multiple. For example, there might be a simultaneous and exhausting set of personal 'identifications' with the 'gang' at the bar, the group of daycare volunteers (and) the pals at the sports club (1992a, p.15).<sup>13</sup>

In redefining issues of identity and related forms of collective expression in this way, it is the concept of lifestyle which provides the key to our understanding of individual choice in deciding which identities to assume and how to live these identities out. 'Lifestyles' describe the sensibilities employed by the individual in choosing certain commodities and patterns of consumption and in articulating these cultural resources as modes of personal expression. This use of the term 'lifestyle' is consonant with a wider attempt among contemporary cultural theorists to rethink the impact of mass culture upon modern society in a way which rejects the notion that the consumption of mass cultural products is in any way 'structured' by traditional class constraints. Thus, as Featherstone argues: "Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of

<sup>12</sup> This study by Maffesoli was originally published in French as *Le Temps des tribus* (1988).

<sup>13</sup> It should be pointed out that in Shield's study the spelling of this term is erroneous in that the writer includes an 's' to produce the word 'Bündes'. The correct spelling of the term (that which appears in this study) is 'Bünde'.

consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearances and bodily dispositions which they design together into a lifestyle" (1991, p.86).

In this way, a lifestyle becomes "a freely chosen game", this, in turn, distinguishing it from a 'way of life', the latter describing a more traditional class-based form of identity which "is typically associated with a more or less stable community" (Kellner: 1992, p.158) (Chaney: 1996, p.92). Clearly, certain groups construct lifestyles incorporating images and consumption patterns which they associate with their class background. For example, the currently in-vogue pop group Oasis and their many fans sport an image, consisting of training shoes, football shirts and duffel coats, which is designed to illustrate their collective sense of working-classness. Therein, however, lies the essential difference between the concept of lifestyle and traditional ways of life, in that the former regards individuals as active consumers whose choice reflects a self-constructed and reflexive notion of identity. Moreover, in positing experimentation as a central characteristic of the modern identity, lifestyle allows for the fact that individuals will also often construct forms of identity which are in no way indicative of a specific class background. A fitting example of this is the chosen lifestyle pattern of the New Age Traveller which brings together young people from a range of social backgrounds but who are commonly attracted by the notion of travelling and the range of New Age sensibilities which inform this type of lifestyle.

All of this is not to suggest that the lifestyle model abandons any consideration of structural issues. Rather, it is concerned to argue that "the structured oppressions of previous social order ... can more easily be subverted by the very diversity of lifestyle" made possible via the appropriation of selected commodities and participation in chosen patterns of consumption (Chaney: 1994, p.81). In contrast to projects such as the CCCS subcultural analysis, the concept of lifestyle argues that traditional social identities - based upon class - and modern 'consumer' identities are framed by differing types of social sensibilities and therefore need to be seen as existing independently of each other. This said, however, it should perhaps also be stressed at this point that, in arguing against the structuralist basis of previous work on contemporary youth, I am in no way attempting to disprove the value of sociological analysis per se. The point of my argument here is simply to illustrate that the academic rationale which deems that sociology is equal to structure is an approach ill-suited to the study of youth style, or indeed any other

form of contemporary consumer-based identity, and that an alternative form of analysis is needed if the physical situations within which modern individuals collectively articulate common lifestyle choices are to be accurately represented via sociological discourse. Within the sociology of youth culture there has traditionally been a wholesale preoccupation with the continuing role of structure in informing particular 'takes' on style and image when the reality of youth culture, since the post-war period at least, has been its successful negotiation of the confines of structure accompanied by a turn towards new forms of sociation.

### The 'post-subculture' generation

Interestingly, during recent years, there has been much reference in the popular press, and to a smaller extent in academic work, to what has been termed the 'post-subculture' generation. Essentially, this cites the 'new found' musical and stylistic eclecticism of contemporary youth, together with its allegedly less radical outlook, as evidence of a break with the former subcultural tradition. Predictably perhaps, this *death* of youth culture, as it has been perceived by some, has elicited a variety of reactions both among journalists and youth cultural theorists. Young, for example, in a New Society article "The Shock of the Old" contends that: "The term 'youth culture' is at best of historical value only, since the customs and mores associated with it have been abandoned by your actual young person" (1985, p.246).

Similarly, Forrest, author of the weekly Sunday Times column "Generation X", recently suggested that: "Youth TV is so depressing because it keeps trying to tell us that we have some sort of youth culture when we know that Generation X has created nothing of value at all".<sup>14</sup> Redhead, on the other hand, dismisses the idea of a post-subcultural generation suggesting alternatively that a new soundtrack of youth, "Post-Political Pop", with its emphasis upon "socially conscious lyrics, honesty and a new rock orientated authenticity ... continues the lost link between popular music and deviance" (1990, pp.105-106). Finally, Grossberg suggests that the 80s and 90s have been marked not by a passing of youth but rather by a struggle for youth. According to Grossberg, youth is no longer a group which can be clearly defined in terms of age, lifestyle, fashion or musical taste. Rather, it has become a keenly contested site. Thus, argues Grossberg: "Those generations which have invested their identities in the category of youth are now attempting to

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from The Sunday Times, July 10th 1994.

produce new articulations in an attempt to control or resist or alter or sustain the dominant conceptions of their own identities and futures" (1992, pp.199-200).

It is Grossberg's view which gives the lie to the other arguments presented here. While I would not want to suggest that youth is involved in a 'struggle' for cultural space, a view which I find wholly synonymous with the themes and perspectives of subcultural theory, Grossberg's argument nevertheless serves to provide the link between what is seen to be at issue in the 'post-subculture thesis' and the alternative approach to the study of youth which I am attempting to sketch out here. If youth is now seen to be the contested domain of 15 - 45 year olds then this merely serves to reinforce the point that youth culture is first and foremost something which people *buy into*, "a theatrical presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images and activities" (Kellner, 1992, p.158). During the 80s and 90s, the youth market has, quite literally, come of age. That former generations of youth are able to hold on to their constructed conceptions of what it means to be young is due, in no small way, to the flurry of 'retro-marketing' which has become increasingly prominent in recent years - the production of CD versions of back catalogue albums, the use of 50s, 60s and 70s hits in films and advertising, the continuing 'comebacks' and world tours of groups and performers who first rose to prominence a quarter of a century ago. Indeed, it could be argued that 'youth market' is too narrow a term for what has now become the marketing of a whole range of lifestyle sensibilities.

At the same time this has enabled successive parental generations to construct their own 'golden age' of youth, to become "caught up in the fantasy that they are themselves youthful, or at least more culturally radical, in ways once equated with youth, than the youth of today" (Ross: 1994, p.8). By the same token, however, the increasing number of commodities and resources available through which individuals are able to construct identities has also expanded contemporary youth's scope for fantasy and experimentation. Samuel has argued that "in the world of pop music (retrochic) is systematic, built into the technology of recording, the tastes of the public and the life-cycle of a hit" (1994, p.90). Arguably, this has become increasingly so during the 80s and 90s when *subcultural* styles have themselves become incorporated into this process. Such styles are frequently taken by young people who deconstruct and rearticulate selected fragments in an apparently infinite number of combinations. Current trends, such as psychobilly, trip hop and new age hippie - to name but a few of those which survive more than a few weeks in the pages of the popular music press - serve to illustrate the

increasing emphasis which is being placed upon style mixing and experimentation by contemporary youth.

In many respects then, a term such as 'post-subculture generation' illustrates perfectly the power of lifestyle sensibilities in enabling social groups to assemble their own particular version of reality. On the one hand it symbolises the older generation's attempt to justify its 'version' of youth as having been "uniquely definitive" (Ross: 1994, p.9). On the other, it reveals a younger generation at play with itself, busily constructing its own collective fiction of youth. At the same time, however, the notion of a post-subculture generation also begins to illustrate the extent to which subcultures, having started as sociological frameworks for the study of distinctive forms of social activity have now acquired a media-generated public life of their own. Despite the considerable theoretical problems associated with the concept of subculture, it remains a fundamental truism that, having being hi-jacked by the media, the word 'subculture' has now become an accepted part of vernacular discourse, a convenient 'catch-all' term which is used arbitrarily by diverse sections of the public, including young people themselves, to describe a range of disparate collective practices whose only obvious area of commonality is that they all involve young people.<sup>15</sup>

During the second part of this chapter, I have been concerned to demonstrate why, in my view, subcultural theory is an inadequate theoretical framework for the study of youth. I have argued that, although the concept of subculture retains a central importance in the sociology of youth its grounding in structuralism makes it an unsatisfactory approach for the study of what are in effect non-structuralist matters. I have then gone on to suggest that the lifestyle model, because of its emphasis upon the individual's ability to actively construct social identities independently of class-based factors, is a much more viable theoretical framework for the study of the leisure-based stylistic innovations of youth.

If lifestyles are, as Chaney (1996) argues, a feature of modernity, a by-product of the development of consumerism, it seems to me that popular music, together with the various taste cultures and sensibilities of style which it has generated, is ideally situated for mapping the relationship between lifestyle and consumer choice. However, if lifestyle theorising has until now remained absent from the study of youth then this is also true for the study of popular music. Like youth, popular

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<sup>15</sup> A similar observation is made by Thornton (1995) who illustrates the central role of the British media in the creation of the term 'rave subculture' during the late 1980s.

music has for the most part been theorised in abstract from the actors and settings which give it social meaning and significance. Consequently, those texts which have attempted to provide sociological accounts of popular music, while perhaps not strictly consensual in their approach with the tenets of subcultural theory, have, nevertheless, also tended to essentialise the social significance of popular music. In chapter two I will look in more detail at the sociology of popular music, and its various departures into social anthropology and cultural studies, setting out in detail the theoretical positions and discourses which have emerged from this area of study. In doing so I will also endeavour to rethink some of the central claims of this work and to lay the foundations for a new approach to the sociological study of popular music. Building upon the 'lifestyle' model established in this chapter, I will begin to illustrate how lifestyle choices, although operating independently of structural factors, are grounded in, what I will call, 'local' knowledges and sensibilities, with the effect that popular music's social significance becomes not only an actively constructed but also highly localised project.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The industry versus the street: The sociology of popular music**

Rock music has involved young people as no other pop or elite art has ever done. In fact, it has involved young people as nothing else at all, aside from sex, has done in generations. It has made poetry real to them . . . It has firmly allied youth, bound them together with an invisible chain of sounds and a network of verbal images in defense against the Elders (Gleason: 1972, p.143).

Prior to the arrival of rock 'n' roll in the early 1950s popular music had, in the words of Middleton, comprised "a relatively narrow stylistic spread, bounded by theatre song on the one side, novelty items deriving from music hall and vaudeville on the other, with Tin Pan Alley song, Hollywood hits and crooners in between" (1990, p.14). With the advent of rock 'n' roll, however, not only did the stylistic direction of popular music radically alter but it also acquired a distinctly youthful and oppositional stance. The first British screenings of the film 'Rock Around the Clock' resulted in cinema seats being damaged and further incidents of minor vandalism in city centres as youths made their way home from cinemas (Street: 1992, p.304). Moreover, if rock 'n' roll music and the sensibilities which it had apparently inspired were incomprehensible to the parent culture, at the same time they posed serious problems for theorists of popular music. Existing work on popular music such as that of Adorno and other mass cultural theorists made little sense when applied to rock 'n' roll and its impact upon youth. Indeed, the continuing centrality of music in youth culture since the 1950s has underlain much of the theoretical debate about how to approach the study of popular music.

In the first part of this chapter, I want to focus upon this debate and to outline and critically evaluate some of theoretical approaches which have been put forward in the attempt to explain popular music's social significance for youth. I will begin with a brief synopsis of Adorno's work, in order to demonstrate the particular problems it has posed for those sociologists who, in responding to the changed cultural significance of popular music from the 1950s onwards, have wanted to posit a more emancipatory theory of popular music and mass culture generally. Subsequently, I will move on to consider the various attempts which have been made to theorise the new sets of relationships which have been seen to characterise music and youth since the post-war period. Although it is not my intention here to

discuss musicological accounts of popular music,<sup>1</sup> the increasingly multi-disciplinary nature of contemporary popular music research has resulted in a number of studies in which musicological modes of enquiry have been combined with the consideration of socio-cultural issues. Thus, work by theorists more commonly associated with the field of musicology, for example, Middleton, Shepherd and Moore features in this chapter. Similarly, two studies from the field of social anthropology will also be considered here, namely, those of Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991) which have provided both a rare and valuable insight into specific 'local' instances of music production and consumption.

In section two I will remain with the theme of locality, more specifically the role of the local in defining musical taste, and will argue that this area now needs to be more thoroughly mapped out by sociological work. Having already outlined in chapter one the need for a revised approach to the study of youth which centres upon the collective gatherings of youth as sites in which to construct and play out different lifestyle orientations, I will go on to argue, aligning the issues explored in chapter one with the central focus of my research, that the relationship between lifestyle and musical preference is in turn bound up with the particularities of a given locality. It will be my further contention that, although some research is now being directed towards local instances of music production and consumption, such work is too general in its conceptualisation of the local; that too little attention is currently being paid to the role of local cultures in communicating collective ideas about the social uses of popular music and the multiple local discourses which popular music consumption serves to highlight or in some cases generate.

### **Adorno on popular music**

In order to properly understand Adorno's theory of popular music, it is necessary in the first instance to briefly relate his ideas back to the theoretical train of thought with which they are most strongly associated, the mass cultural critique of the Frankfurt School. Founded during the 1930s, the Frankfurt School, whose leading theorists also included Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas, was chiefly concerned to study the negative social effects which, they argued, were produced as a consequence of the increasing production of and reliance upon mass cultural commodities. According to the Frankfurt theorists, the mass cultural profile of modern society signalled the fate of the individual's autonomy, this being steadily replaced by a "scientific-technological rationality" (Bottomore: 1984, p.41). The

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mellors (1973).



implication here is that with the rise of mass culture the individual is denied any possibility of creative participation in leisure activities and becomes simply a cultural 'dupe'. Thus, as MacDonald argues, expounding a view which echoes the Frankfurt School approach: "Mass Culture (sic) is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying" (1953, p.60).

Each of the Frankfurt theorists varied in their account of the way in which mass society served to suppress individual autonomy. Adorno was particularly concerned with the fetishising effects of mass culture upon art. In the case of music, argued Adorno, because it "had been invaded by the capitalist ethos, its fetishisation was almost total" (Jay: 1973, p.190). At the centre of Adorno's argument lies a distinction between serious 'art' music and commercial 'pop' music. The social reception of music, he suggests, is essentially pre-programmed, musical composition and production following exacting guidelines which are calculated to produce a specific and uniformed response among listeners. With art music, however, argues Adorno, musical meanings become apparent to the listener only after a considerable degree of listening skill has been applied, this being essential if the essence of a given musical piece, its "concrete totality", is to be properly understood (Adorno: 1941, p.303). In the case of popular music, however, no such listening skill is necessary as, according to Adorno:

The composition hears for the listener . . . Not only does it not require effort to follow its concrete stream; it actually gives him models under which anything concrete still remaining may be subsumed. The schematic build up dictates the way in which he must listen while, at the same time, it makes any effort in listening unnecessary. Popular music is "pre-digested" in a way strongly resembling the fad of "digests" of printed material (ibid., p. 306).

Adorno goes further in his critique of popular music, suggesting that it also plays a role in maintaining the social relations of capitalist production. According to Adorno, popular music does this in two main ways. Firstly, it acts as a form of distraction in unison with other forms of mass produced leisure, ensuring that the workforce remains oblivious to the mechanisms of oppression which underpin the capitalist mode of production. Secondly, the "patterned and pre-digested" nature of the music offers relief "from both boredom and effort simultaneously" with the

result that periods of leisure can be tailored to provide maximum relaxation and refreshment for the workforce (ibid.).

Adorno's work poses a number of problems for theorists seeking to explain the cultural impact of popular music since the post-war period, not least of all that, in concentrating upon its alleged regulating and standardising effects, Adorno closes off any possibility of social actors themselves playing a part in determining the meaning and significance of popular music. Consequently, the work of Adorno has been taken to task on a number of occasions. Middleton, for example, argues that "the reception of cultural products" cannot, as Adorno contends, be taken to "represent a direct appropriation of the consumer into a pre-given framework but is *mediated* by other, varied interpretative assumptions associated with other social institutions and values" (1990, p.60). Similarly, Frith, whose contribution to the study of popular music has been particularly extensive, has argued that Adorno's theory of consumption reduces "a complex social process to a simple psychological effect" (1983, p.57). In attempting to rethink Adorno's approach some theorists have turned to the more sympathetic ideas of Benjamin on the social effects of mass culture. In contrast to Adorno, Benjamin argues that "technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience which technological *production* threatens to take away" (Buck-Morss: 1989, p.268). Although none of Benjamin's work focused upon music as such, his ideas can be applied to the study of music, especially mechanically reproduced music. A particularly effective demonstration of this is offered by Middleton who compares Benjamin's thesis on the film audience to the listener's reception of a piece of recorded music. Thus, observes Middleton

... Benjamin sees the film audience, detached from the moment of production, as being in the position of a *critic*, identifying with the analytical work of the camera rather than with the experience of the characters. The transparency of technique and the ubiquity of the reproductions turns everyone into an *expert*, hence a *potential* participant ... This approach has enormously suggestive potential for analysis of listening, for it fully accepts the significance of new perceptual attitudes while by-passing or at least putting into question the usual, too easy Adornian assumptions of passivity (1990, pp.65-66).

Arguably, however, neither the ideas of Adorno or the counter-arguments of Benjamin are singularly equipped to provide a satisfactory account of popular

music's role in contemporary society. Indeed, it is in the theoretical 'no-man's land' which exists between these arguments that the study of popular music has for the most part been pursued. Popular music remains something of an anomaly, being as it is an accessible and effective means of cultural expression subsisting "within the nexus of capitalist production" (ibid.). The continuing problem for theorists then has been to determine the nature of the relationship between popular music's status as a mass produced commodity and its role as a cultural resource (Frith: 1983, p.57). To this end a number of different approaches have been developed. I want now to consider each of these approaches in turn.

### **The contested nature of popular music**

We fight our way through the massed and levelled collective taste of the Top 40, just looking for a little something we can call our own. But when we find it and jam the radio to hear it again it isn't just ours - it is a link to thousands of others who are sharing it with us. As a matter of a single song this might mean very little; as culture, as a way of life, you can't beat it (Marcus: 1977, p.115).

The starting point for many theorists of popular music has been the music industry itself, or rather the opposing interests around which the modern music industry is constructed. While music "was a commercial product long before rock 'n' roll", the arrival of the latter together with its pronounced cultural effect upon young people created a number of problems for the music industry (Frith: 1983, p.32). Of these, the crucial problem was how to market a music which was clearly viable as a commercial product but at the same time highly controversial. In particular, the nature of its partly Afro-American roots<sup>2</sup> made rock 'n' roll vulnerable to a range of accusations, particularly in the USA, its place of origin. The Reverend Albert Carter of the Pentecostal Church, Nottingham, for example, expressed the view that: "Rock 'n' roll (was) a revival of devil dancing . . . the same sort of thing that is done in a black magic ritual" (Street: 1992, p.305). Likewise, rock 'n' roll was criticised by the parent culture because of the damage it was perceived to be causing to the moral fabric of white society, allegedly inciting teenagers to unruly behaviour (Hill: 1992, pp.52-53). Indeed, such antagonisms were shared by the industry itself. Thus, the initial reaction of record companies was to attempt "to knock the rough edges off rock 'n' roll" (Gillett: 1983, p.41). As Gillett explains:

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<sup>2</sup> Although rock 'n' roll is often supposed to have originated directly from Afro-American folk music, it is actually a hybrid between Afro-American folk and white American country and western music.

The implication was that people didn't want their music to be as brash, blatantly sexual, and spontaneous as the pure rock 'n' roll records were. But although the position was maintained through to 1963, the success in the United States around this time of British groups with similar qualities suggested that the audience still did prefer this kind of music, if it knew about its availability (ibid.).

The way that rock 'n' roll crucially differed from earlier forms of popular music was the reflexivity of the discourse which was established between the music and its newly emerging youthful audience. The meaning of rock 'n' roll could not be separated from the contexts in which it was consumed and this has been a continuing feature of subsequent post-war and contemporary popular music styles. This is particularly well summed up by Grossberg who has argued that the "operational logics" of the "rock formation" (Grossberg's term for post-war pop) "involve more than just the relationships between logics of production and logics of consumption. They define particular ways of navigating the spaces and places, the territorializations of power, of daily life" (1994, p.48). Like other forms of post-war popular culture then, popular music has become an increasingly contested medium. As Garofalo points out, popular mass culture is

...one arena where ideological struggle - the struggle over the power to define - takes place. While there is no question that in this arena the forces arrayed in support of the existing hegemony are formidable, there are also numerous instances where mass culture - and in particular popular music - issues serious challenges to hegemonic power (1992, p.2).

The ability of popular music to serve as an effective platform for the delivery of such challenges is, in turn, further enhanced by the uncertainty of the music market itself. If the music industry was relatively unprepared for the arrival of rock 'n' roll, then this scenario has since been repeated on numerous occasions, most recently by Acid House. In his study Sound Effects (1983), Frith suggests that: "Record companies by nature don't much care what forms music takes as long as they can be controlled to ensure profit - musics and musicians can be packaged and sold, whatever their styles" (p.32). Perhaps a more accurate way of stating this argument would be to say that all the recording industry can maintain with certainty is that it is in place to produce and market forms of popular music. Beyond this assertion, however, the production process and the forms of interaction which are established between products and consumers becomes rather

less of an exact science. As Attali has pointed out, the music industry occupies a particularly precarious position situated “on the borderline between the most sophisticated marketing and the most unpredictable of cottage industries” (1985, pp.102-103). Thus, while record companies would like to think that they are able to predict which artists and musical styles will prove to be the most commercially viable this remains largely an erroneous game of intuition.

Herein lies the central contradiction in modern music marketing, for in attempting to work as closely as possible within the “organisational conventions (and) commercial logic of capitalism” the recording industry is at the same time forced to exercise a looser control over the commodities which are marketed, the performing artists themselves (Negus: 1992, p.vii). In the final analysis, it is the stylistic or ideological appeal of performing artists and their music which generates profit for the industry. Harron, for example, has stated that in the wake of the 60s hippie movement “record companies . . . were confused and even alarmed by the strange groups whose music was so profitable (and had to) bring in young outsiders to tell them what would make a hit” (1987, p.184). More than any other mass produced commodity then, popular music is a contested form. While successful artists may generate vast amounts of income for the record companies to which they are signed, at the same time they frequently utilise the mass dissemination of their music or the magnitude of their public profile to communicate a variety of socio-political issues “that have implications beyond their immediate impact on mass media entertainment” (Ullestad: 1992, p.37).

This latter issue is covered extensively in Frith and Horne’s study Art into Pop (1987) which focuses upon the importance of the British art school since the post-war period as a training ground for a succession of musical innovators, such as John Lennon, Bryan Ferry and Paul Weller, who “inflected pop music with bohemian dreams and Romantic fantasies and laid out the ideology of ‘rock’” (p.73). Frith and Horne’s study also reveals a further contradiction in the process of popular music making by illustrating how those musicians who utilise their music as a vehicle for ideological or artistic statements must then attempt to resolve the problem of maintaining their artistic and/or political integrity while at the same time remaining part of a large scale capitalist concern. Thus, for example, argue Frith and Horne, in adopting the term ‘progressive rock’ a number of late 60s groups, among them Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin, “presented themselves as performers and composers ‘above’ the normal pop practice and, by the early

1970s were so successful in selling high seriousness ... that any contradictions between creative and market forces seemed to be resolved" (ibid., p.73-74).

At this point it becomes necessary to consider a further factor which is also instrumental in defusing the contradictions inherent in popular music, that of audience reception. Again, the work of Frith is a useful starting point here, more specifically, his concept of authenticity. In his study "The magic that can set you free" (1980), an account of the cultural effects of progressive rock, Frith argues that, from the point of view of the audience, how the music is actually "made" and distributed becomes rather less important than how it "works ... the question of *how* music comes to represent its listeners is begged" (1980, p.159). According to Frith, in the case of progressive rock, it was the aesthetic discourse established between audiences and performers that became centrally important in that it combined folk and art ideologies. Thus, argues Frith, "as folk music rock is heard to represent the community of youth, as art music rock is heard as the sound of individual, creative sensibility" (1987, p.136).

Negus, in his recent study Producing Pop (1992), has also used this notion of authenticity. Unlike Frith, however, Negus's work suggests that an audience's "ethic of authenticity" is not necessarily reliant upon their framing a collective rejection of a particular music's status as a commodity form, but rather that audience perceptions of commercialism and authenticity often co-exist side by side. Thus, argues Negus: "It is an irony of consumption that, as audiences, we acknowledge that our favourite artists, whether Bob Dylan, Public Enemy or Madonna are studied, calculated and hyped in various ways, but at the same time we accept them as 'real'" (p.70). Again, however, Negus's argument would appear to suggest that, from the point of view of the audience, the processes which underlie the production and distribution of popular music are rather less important than its value as a cultural resource; than the ways in which it can be appropriated and reworked to serve a particular purpose.

By the same token, however, it is important not to overstate popular music's utility in this respect. In the processes of producing and marketing pop, the music industry clearly imposes structures of meaning on particular genres and sounds which serve in turn to frame audiences' uses of popular music. Thus, as Frith argues "we are not free to read anything we want into a song ... music is obviously rule-bound. We hear things as music because their sounds obey a particular, familiar logic, and for most pop fans (who are technically, non-musical) this logic

is out of our control” (1987, p.139). Similarly, a number of theorists have pointed to the not insubstantial role of the music industry in the construction of sexuality. A particularly illustrative example of this is provided by Frith and McRobbie in their study “Rock and Sexuality” (1978) where it is argued that:

Not only do we find men occupying every important role in the rock industry and in effect being responsible for the creation and construction of suitable female images, we also witness in rock the presentation and marketing of masculine styles. And we are offered not one definitive image of masculine sexuality, but a variety of male sexual poses which are most often expressed in terms of stereotypes (p.374).

More recent work has served to challenge such observations, suggesting that as public perceptions of gender and sexuality have changed this has in turn prompted changes in the ways in which they are represented through the popular music medium. Russell, for example, has argued that in recognition of the threat posed by the AIDS virus to sexual promiscuity, Acid House promoted dancing as a form of leisure in itself “and a way of rejecting the dated 70s notion of the disco as a ‘meat market’”(1993, p.98). Similarly, in her study of MTV, Kaplan argues that: “The plethora of gender positions on the channel is arguably linked to the heterogeneity of current sex roles and to an imaginary constructed out of a world in which all traditional categories, boundaries, and institutions are being questioned” (1987, p.90). Nevertheless, it seems clear that despite such recent developments, the actual changes taking place within the industry itself have been relatively minor. Certainly, the ratio of women who become successful in the music industry, both as performers and employees, is still low compared to that of men<sup>3</sup> while the teenage market continues to be dominated by all male vocal groups such as Take That and East 17.

The music industry then plays a substantial role in determining how music is heard and used by consumers. At the same time, however, consumers too are active in creating musical meanings. Popular music audiences are not the cultural dupes depicted in mass cultural theory. Rather, they take the structures of meaning - the musical and extra-musical resources associated with particular genres of pop - and combine them with meanings of their own to produce distinctive variations in patterns of consumption and stylistic expression. It is with such processes of appropriation and the factors deemed to underlie the social uses of particular pop

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bayton (1993) and Negus (1992, pp.57-60, 126-128).

genres that the other sociological approaches to the study of popular music have been chiefly concerned.

### Subcultures

As has already been extensively addressed in chapter one, it is the contention of the subcultural theorists that music and style-based youth groupings, such as the teddy boys and the mods, served as visual statements for pockets of working class resistance to structural changes taking place in post-war British society. Interestingly, however, if popular music is considered to be central to the subculture phenomenon, little attention is paid to its actual function as a cultural resource.

An early forerunner of the Birmingham CCCS work was Hall and Whannel's study "The Young Audience" (1964). In fairness, Hall and Whannel make a more concentrated effort to engage with the question of how popular music as a form of teenage entertainment interacts with the sensibilities of youth to produce distinctive cultural forms than the later CCCS studies. This said, however, the study is far from exhaustive and its results largely unsatisfactory. Thus, while it is argued that teenage entertainments perform "a cultural and educative role which commercial providers seem little aware of", no justification for this assertion is offered beyond Hall and Whannel's own narrative assumptions (p.29). Thus, in assessing the cultural role of popular music, it is suggested by Hall and Whannel that:

Though there is much to be learned from the lyrics of pop songs, there is more in the *beat* (loud, simple, insistent), the *backing* (strong, guitar-dominated), the *presentation* (larger than life, mechanically etherealized), the *inflections* of voice (sometimes the self-pitying, plaintive cry, and later the yeah-saying, affirmative shouting), or the *intonations* (at one stage mid-Atlantic in speech and pronunciation, but more recently northern and provincial) (ibid., p.32).

A similar problem is evident in the later work on youth subcultures, which, as I have previously demonstrated, is similarly narrative in its approach. Moreover, it is interesting to note that, in the case of subcultural theory, the focus is placed almost exclusively upon accounts of style, such accounts being interspersed by an occasional and generally cursory reference to music. Thus, as Laing (whose own work on the social significance of 'punk rock' is considered later) has pointed out



in relation to Hebdige's treatment of punk in Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), "for Hebdige, music is only one part of a stylistic ensemble called 'punk', and judging by the limited space he devotes to it, not the most important part. That role is reserved for the visual display of . . . the 'punk look'" (1985, p.x).

The only subcultural theorist to have made any sustained attempt to study the social meaning of popular music itself is Willis. Although presented initially in the form of a CCCS working paper, "Symbolism and Practice: A Theory for the Social Meaning of Pop Music" (1974), Willis's views on this issue are covered more extensively in Profane Culture (1978). As such, it has to be said that the problems already identified with the approach employed in this study, particularly the use of homology, also appertain to Willis's theory of popular music. Reading the working class motorbike boys' and the middle class hippies' uses of music in terms of their contrasting structural circumstances, Willis relates the former's preference for rock 'n' roll singles, with their straight forward musical arrangements and "good strong beat" for dancing, to the group's need for a readily accessible "antidote to boredom" (p.68). At the same time, argues Willis, the hippies' preference for the more melodically and rhythmically complex progressive rock reflected their desire for music which "demanded serious listening and attention" (ibid., p.157). Similarly, Willis argues that the hippies' desire to restructure "'normal' time" also attracted them to progressive rock, its LP format together with featured electronic effects, such as "echo, feedback, stereo (and) loudness itself . . . (giving) the impression of space and lateral extension" (Willis: 1978, pp.168, 167).

Bradley's study Understanding Rock 'n' Roll (1992) is an interesting departure from subcultural theory in that it serves both to rethink the class-based structuralist argument of the subcultural theorists while simultaneously paying much greater attention to the role of popular music itself as a mode of youthful expression. While retaining the notion of resistance, Bradley argues that the resistance which rock 'n' roll music offered to its consumers took the form of a reaction against "the norms of privacy and 'modesty' involved in . . . music use" adding that rock 'n' roll "involved loudness, showing off, getting together in crowds to do uninhibited things: it even had the glamour of being widely banned in the clubs until around 1960" (pp.127, 126). Moreover, Bradley also makes the important point that participation in such forms of collective expression was not restricted purely to followers of particular stylistic fashions. On the contrary, argues Bradley, "this resistant element was also involved in music-use *beyond* the youth

culture, among non-participants, and among ex-participants as the years went by, with the youth culture acting as a cultural example for others to follow in their musical lives" (ibid., p.107).

There is, however, a fundamental problem associated with Bradley's approach which also needs to be considered. According to Bradley, the meanings which informed the social use of rock 'n' roll were "encoded by makers and *available* to listeners" (ibid., my emphasis). As a result, Bradley's work serves only to discuss the allegedly inherent meanings of rock 'n' roll and fails to allow for the possibility of the audience itself playing a part in shaping the meaning of the music. Particularly problematic in this respect is Bradley's analysis of the beat of rock 'n' roll and the "dance-response" which it evoked. Thus, argues Bradley: "Each dancer enjoys a direct relation - through the synchronization of his or her movements to the music, and is thus part of a collective ... whose visible sign is the diverse but unified crowd on the floor" (p.114). Arguably, however, such an interpretation is oversimplistic in that it fails to take into account the different networks of sociality which are framed within the context of the music or dance event. While music may act as a common backdrop for each of these networks, not all of them involve the type of direct engagement with the music suggested by Bradley. Thus, for example, as Shumway has pointed out, not only do audiences at popular music events "typically dance, but they usually eat, drink and talk during the performance" (1992, p.128). Moreover, given that certain forms of sociality do indeed orientate more directly around the music itself, Bradley's notion that such sociality responds directly to a system of meanings previously encoded in the music by its producers is difficult to maintain. This point is taken up by musicologist Moore who argues against the notion that music can contain inherent meanings, contending instead that: "The sense that audiences make of music does not result from the decoding of any previously encoded message ... the meaning even of the lyrics cannot be fixedly encoded in them by the singer, but they represent a ground for negotiation, the listener ultimately construing them relatively freely" (1993, pp.163, 159).

### Taste cultures

A further theoretical framework for studying the ways in which social actors construct meanings around particular pop genres has been developed using the concept of 'taste cultures'. This approach is relatively new to popular music studies and as such there is as yet no firm consensus as to how it should be

applied. As a means of explaining the social significance of popular music, however, the concept of taste cultures is particularly useful in that, unlike the subcultural approach, it acknowledges the fact that styles of popular music are appropriated and used by a range of different social groups and thus contain not singular but multiple meanings.

This point is well illustrated in Laing's study of punk rock, One Chord Wonders (1985). Although Laing does not use the term 'taste culture' as such, his approach is very much in keeping with central tenets of the taste culture argument. Moving beyond Hebdige's reading of punk as a working class phenomenon, Laing suggests that the appeal of punk was rooted in "the contrast between (its) private accessibility and its public invisibility" (p.37). The 'authenticity' of the original punk movement, suggests Laing, was unwittingly created by the broadcasting and retailing industries themselves, the latter's censorship of certain records conferring upon punk "exclusivist tendencies" and an outsider status thus "consolidating a special community of punks, to whom punk rock (had) special meanings" (ibid.). Moreover, according to Laing the symbolic messages implicit in the censorship of punk were not only open to interpretation by followers of the punk style but also by the wider record buying public, this being demonstrated by the banning and boycotting of one particular punk rock song, The Sex Pistol's 'God Save The Queen'. Thus, as Laing explains:

By defining 'God Save The Queen's' difference from the norm as total ... the music industry's institutions ... virtually instructed anyone with access to it that its effects on them would be totally different from the leisure pleasure provided by the context of daytime radio or *Top Of The Pops*. And of course, most of the 250 000 purchasers of the disc were not 'punks', and nor did buying it confer that status upon them. But the role offered to the listener to 'God Save The Queen' was set apart from both the established music industry and the official royalist celebrations. It was an independent and oppositional role (ibid., p.38).

Laing's study is important for several reasons. First of all, it signifies a further break with the crude class-based interpretations of musical taste posited by subcultural theorists. Indeed, Laing actively demonstrates how, as opposed to becoming a vehicle for the expression of class consciousness, the fact of musical taste itself can become a form of opposition. In endorsing the marginalised status of punk rock, its followers were assured of a ready made source of antagonism,

which could then be used, if so desired, to articulate a variety of themes and issues. Indeed, this is further evidenced by the numerous applications in which punk was and continues to be used. During the original 'punk summer' of 1977, punk in Britain came to encapsulate everything from a form of bizarre 'street corner society', which aimed to poke fun at the establishment, to organised anti-Fascist events. In Germany, where punk rock continues to have a large following, the style is increasingly used as a mode of expression for problems encountered in specific localities. In some of the larger cities, the high demand for rented accommodation has prompted landlords to increase rents and to be increasingly selective about tenancy applicants (Hafeneger, Stüwe and Weigel: 1992, p.33). In the Summer of 1994 this lead groups of punks in the city of Hannover to take to the streets in protest, an action which resulted in several violent clashes with the police.<sup>4</sup>

Equally important in Laing's study is his illustration that the social uses of a particular musical style do not necessarily demand investment in the accepted accompanying visual style. Thus, as Laing points out, the audience for 'God Save The Queen' was much wider than the immediate punk fraternity, crossing over into different taste cultures and chiming with the differing lifestyle orientations contained within these taste cultures. Admittedly, as Laing points out, the anti-establishment message of the song was virtually assured by the 'special' attention which the media devoted to it. Nevertheless, it is still possible to argue that the reception and interpretation of such a message, even when so clearly defined, could be widely interpreted and reworked to fit in with the particular lifestyle orientation of the listener. The frustrated adolescent, the political activist, the atheist and the anti-royalist will all comprehend the message in 'God Save The Queen' in a similar fashion, but the significance which they attach to it will be widely different.

Before going on to consider taste cultures in more detail, a small point of clarification is required. Clearly, musical taste is not randomly distributed throughout a given population but rather forms particular patterns and consistencies which can indeed derive from expectations based upon social factors such as class and education. This said, however, I would argue that the relationship between musical taste, class and education is somewhat less rigid than has previously been supposed and is mediated by a number of other factors, particularly those relating to locality. This contention is in clear contrast to rigidly

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from a news report which appeared in the Frankfurter Rundschau, September 5th 1994.

class-based arguments such as that of Murdock and McCron (1976), whose analysis of progressive rock has led them to the conclusion that:

The basic technological and stylistic division between 'progressive' rock and mainstream pop largely corresponded to a social division within the youth audience, between those who had left school at the minimum age and those who stayed on to take up a place in the rapidly expanding higher education sector, a division which in turn largely reflected the class differentials in educational opportunity (p.23).

Arguably, such an interpretation is far too general in its approach. Thus, for example, it cannot explain the fact that in some areas, particularly in British industrial cities in the Midlands and the Northeast, progressive rock groups such as Pink Floyd, Genesis and Yes have a strong working class following. Indeed, as I will go on to consider in more detail during the course of chapter six, such instances of working class musical taste not only overturn conventional class-based accounts of popular music's social significance but also call for an analytical approach which is more sensitive to the highly particularised 'local' arrangements which give rise to such tastes. In a recent study of taste cultures, Lewis argues against the notion of "a one-to-one relationship between social class level and music consumption", suggesting alternatively that: "Popular music is dynamic, charged with subjective meanings, and it dramatically cuts across standard indicators such as social class, age, and education in creating groupings with common musical expectations and symbolic definitions" (1992, p.141).

Lewis further suggests that taste cultures may grow out of a shared sense of experience, the aesthetic and/or political values which members attach to a particular popular music genre resulting from circumstances encountered in specific localities. Thus, he argues: "A critical demographic variable is region, both for charting the origin of and spread of a musical form, and for tracing audience clusters. People look to specific musics as symbolic anchors in regions, as signs of community, belonging, and a shared past" (ibid., p.144). Lewis's argument is to some extent supported by DiMaggio, Peterson and Esco's seventies study of country music in which it was suggested that a discernible link existed between a preference for country music, lifestyle, location and personal outlook. Thus, according to the findings of the study, country fans tended to be "urban-living, white adults with rural roots who are established in home, family and job, but are content with none of these" (1972, p.50).

Curiously the concept of musical taste as a locally informed sensibility has remained largely under-represented in the existing literature on popular music. Certainly, there is currently very little in the way of a sociological commitment to the study of the relationship between musical taste, lifestyle and locality. I will go on to present my own analysis of this relationship later in this chapter. Before doing so, however, it is useful to first consider those studies which have in some way contributed to our understanding of popular music's role in the context of the local.

### **Popular music as a local resource**

Over the last decade there has been a growth of interest in the study of 'local' cultures. Ironically, much of this interest stems directly from the insights provided by the "accelerating processes of globalisation" (Smart: 1993, p.129). Thus, as Featherstone argues, a "paradoxical consequence of the process of globalization, the awareness of the finitude of the boundedness of the planet and humanity, is not to produce homogeneity but to familiarize us with greater diversity, the extensive range of local cultures" (1993, p.169). In the area of popular music studies, however, the attention paid to the role of the local has been rather minimal. Moreover, for the most part, studies which have focused upon or made reference to local music cultures have tended to concentrate upon the actual production of music rather than musical consumption. During the course of my own work I will attempt to redress this imbalance by offering a range of insights into the characteristically local nature of consumption patterns; into those events which Chaney refers to as "the social occasions of participation" in popular music (1994, p.81). At the same time, however, I will endeavour to argue that the production and consumption of music, at the local level at least, are by no means mutually exclusive, that both can and do in fact offer similar opportunities for occasions of sociality.

A similar, if underdeveloped line of argument emerges from Finnegan's social-anthropological study The Hidden Musicians (1989), an exploration of various local music making concerns in Milton Keynes. As Finnegan points out, while it "is true that local music-making in the sense of direct participation in performance is the pursuit of a minority . . . (such) musical practices . . . involve a whole host of other people than just performers" (p.6). Finnegan's observation is useful in that, through its account of extra-performance related participation in local live music events - forms of participation which might, for example, include the designing of

posters, selling tickets or helping to assemble staging or lighting equipment, it begins to examine the wider dimensions of music-making's function as an occasion of sociality. In chapter six, which focuses on a North East Pink Floyd 'tribute' band and its audience, I will develop the tenets of Finnegan's argument further by considering how local live music events also give rise to what I have called occasions of 'extra-musical' sociality. Another useful aspect of Finnegan's study relates to her presentation of the local as a polymusical environment, an amalgam of differing "musical worlds" (ibid., p.6). According to Finnegan, by studying the polymusical character of a given locality, instead of "focussing exclusively upon a single tradition", one can begin to understand more fully the social dynamics which inform the acquisition of musical taste and prescribe the local meaning and significance attached to particular musical genres. Thus, argues Finnegan

... what is heard as 'music' is characterised not by its formal properties but by people's view of it, by the special frame drawn round particular forms of sound and their overt social enactment. Music is thus defined in different ways among different groups, each of whom have their own conventions supported by existing practises and ideas about the right way in which music should be realised (ibid., p.7).

A further important investigation into the local knowledges which underpin music production at the grass level is provided in Cohen's study Rock Culture in Liverpool (1991). Addressing current youthful sensibilities in Liverpool in the context of the city's socio-economic climate, Cohen demonstrates the particular intimacy of the relationship between musical and local discourse in the Liverpool area. Thus she writes, "in a city where the attitude of many young people was that you might as well pick up a guitar as take exams, since your chances of finding full-time occupation from either were just the same, being in a band was an accepted way of life and could provide a means of justifying one's existence" (p.3). Moreover, as Cohen goes on to point out, such local knowledges also acted as a frame of reference for local musicians and consumers when talking about the music produced in Liverpool. Indeed it is interesting to note the varied and overlapping range of discourses which locally produced music was deemed to articulate. Thus, in attempting to account for the music's "melodic, lyrical style":

Some attributed it to the influence of the Beatles or to the absence of students from the music scene, who tended to favour more 'alternative' types of

music. Some suggested that the lack of 'angry' music or music of a more overtly political nature reflected the escapist tendency of the bands that produced instead music of a 'dreamy' and 'wistful' style. Others pointed out that Merseysiders had understandably grown cynical about politics and therefore avoided writing about it (ibid., p.15).

A somewhat different perspective on the social significance of local music-making is presented in Wallis and Malm's study Big Sounds from Small Peoples (1984). Although primarily concerned with the independent and small scale production of recorded music, this study offers a valuable insight into the social circumstances from which such local industries emerge and the communities which they service. A pertinent example of this is the study's reference to Recordiau Sain, a small Welsh recording label established in 1969 to promote Welsh language popular music. According to Wallis and Malm, Sain was the first of a small number of local labels established by Welsh language enthusiasts, "people who felt that they were losing part of their cultural identity with the demise of the language their parents spoke" (p.140). Wallis and Malm then go on to illustrate how, using the medium of the phonogram, such enthusiasts are able to "communicate with fellow Welsh-speakers and tease the establishment" (ibid., p.141).

The power of political expression which marginalised social groups can often harness through the creation of a 'home grown' grass roots music culture is further examined in Rose's study "A Style Nobody Can Deal With" (1994). Focussing upon the origins of Afro-American hip hop as a form of New York street culture, Rose argues that the hip hop style accurately reflected "the tensions and contradictions in the urban public landscape" (p.72). Thus, according to Rose:

Even as today's rappers revise and redirect rap music, most understand themselves as working out of a tradition of style, attitude and form which has critical and primary roots in New York City in the 1970s. Substantial postindustrial shifts in economic conditions, access to housing, demographics and communication networks were crucial to the formation of the conditions which nurtured the cultural hybrids and sociopolitical tenor of hip hop's lyrics and music (ibid., p.73).

In addition to the medium of music itself, Rose also stresses the importance of a number of extra-musical resources associated with hip hop culture. Particularly important, she argues, is the need to visibly impress the nature of the hip hop



mission on the face of the local environment: "Graffiti artists spray-painted murals and (name) "tags" on trains, trucks and playgrounds, claiming territories and inscribing their otherwise contained identities on public property" (ibid., p.71).

In each of the above studies the local significance of music is studied primarily in the context of some aspect of local music production. Clearly, however, such an approach is insufficient for a broader understanding of the way in which music interacts with local cultures. For much of the time, music's influence upon the character of the local has less to do with its being a local product and more to do with the way in which commercially available musical products are appropriated and reworked within the context of a given local culture. There is currently very little literature which seeks to explore such processes of appropriation and adaptation while those that do are arguably too limited in their scope. A useful introduction to this issue - and thus to the themes which I will go on to explore in further chapters - is provided by Shepherd. Focusing on the reception of transnational music at the local level, Shepherd offers the following observation. Music, he suggests, "does not 'carry' its meaning and 'give it' to participants and listeners. Affect and meaning have to be created anew in the specific social and historical circumstances of music's creation and use" (1993, p.138).

The salience of Shepherd's argument is perhaps best demonstrated in some of the recent work dealing with the issue of music and ethnicity. Thus, for example, in charting the reception of reggae in Britain by ethnic minority groups of Afro-Caribbean descent, Gilroy argues that the latter "ceased ... to signify an exclusively ethnic, Jamaican style and derived a different kind of cultural legitimacy both from a new global status and from its expression of what might be termed a pan-Caribbean culture" (1993, p.82). A similar argument is put forward by Lipsitz in *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994). In the case of Lipsitz, however, perhaps because of the writer's concern to rethink the fragmentation thesis central to postmodernism, the link between the remaking of musical meanings and the problems of cultural adjustment faced by immigrant populations is much more succinctly stated. Thus, according to Lipsitz, "musical syncretisms disclose the dynamics of cultural syncretisms basic to the process of immigration, and acculturation in contemporary societies" (p.126). Assessing this observation within the context of modern Britain, Lipsitz goes on to argue:

Immigrants leaving the Caribbean and Asia ... became "Black" in Britain, an identity that they do not have in their home countries, but which becomes

salient to them in England as a consequence of racism directed at them from outside of their communities as well as from its utility to them as a device for building unity within and across aggrieved populations . . . Popular music in Britain (also) plays an important role in building solidarity within and across immigrant communities, while at the same time serving as a site for negotiation and contestation between groups (ibid.).

I will go on to examine the implications of Lipsitz and Gilroy's work for the understanding of local music cultures in more detail in chapter four which focusses on the reception of Bhangra among Asian minority groups in Newcastle upon Tyne and in chapter five where I present a comparative analysis of the cultural significance of hip hop in Newcastle and in the German city of Frankfurt am Main. At this stage, however, it seems significant to point out that while existing work on instances of local music production and consumption has offered some useful insights into the social uses of music, at the same time the scope of this work is somewhat limited. On the whole, there has been a failure on the part of such studies to acknowledge the extent to which the particularities of a given locality, together with the resources available within that locality, will act to produce a series of distinctive, localised responses to and collective uses of particular forms of popular music.

### **Rethinking the significance of the local in framing the social uses of popular music**

If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities, then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can be either, or both, a source of richness or a source of conflict (Massey: 1993, p.65).

In the second part of chapter one I suggested that the concept of subculture, in addition to being wholly authorial in construct, was a far too narrow and limited theoretical interpretation of the stylistic innovations of youth. I then went on to offer an alternative analytical model based upon lifestyle theory and argued that the latter was far better suited to the study of stylistic innovations among contemporary youth in that it allowed for the autonomous nature of the modern consumer constructing and reconstructing identities and moving freely between different 'sites' of collective expression. In the course of this chapter I have begun to consider how the act of music consumption further contributes to the shaping of

identity - or a series of identities - in my examination of the notion of musical authenticity and the concept of taste cultures. Now, while I have argued that musical and stylistic preferences, as features of consumerism, function independently of structural conditions, at the same time I want to argue that such features of social life are not free floating but rather take part in a perpetual dialogue with the particular social spaces in which they are lived out; with the social and spatial organisation of a given locality. It is my further contention that, in the case of those studies which have previously examined local instances of music production and consumption in an attempt to chart popular music's translation into forms of vernacular discourse, this dialogue between musical taste and the politics of place has been largely ignored. Arguably, this has much to do with the way in which the local is perceived in such studies. Thus, while considerable emphasis has been placed upon the distinctiveness of one local culture in relation to another, little attention has been placed upon the networks of competing discourses which characterise specific localities.

In a recent study, Keith and Pile have argued that "simultaneously present in any landscape are multiple enunciations of distinct forms of space" (1993, p.6). Consequently, they suggest, the term 'spaciality' may now be used

... to capture the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other; to conjure up the circumstances in which society and space are simultaneously realized by thinking, feeling, doing individuals and also to conjure up the many different conditions in which such realizations are experienced by thinking, feeling, doing subjects (ibid.).

One of the ways in which individuals make such simultaneous realisations of society and space is through the act of musical consumption. Indeed, musical consumption has proved to be both a particularly distinctive and enduring medium for the collective reconstruction of not only public but also private space. To map the spaces of any post industrial conurbation in terms of the patterns of musical consumption which exist there is to discover a series of shifting and overlapping territories. Werlen has argued that all social action is organised around "spatial frames of reference ... whose definition establishes particular characteristic dimensions which coincide with the ontology of the (physical, social or mental/subjective) object to be located" (1993, p.144). This suggests that the significance which social actors attach to an occasion of musical consumption is underscored by the particular 'spatial frame of reference' to which that occasion

corresponds. This theory is adequate to explain competing representations of space as these may arise between participants of a music event and non-participants, as is illustrated by Heatherington's account of the two competing "social spatializations" attached to Stonehenge as a festival site and a place of heritage (1992, p.88). At the same time, however, it takes no account of the competing spatial frames of reference which are possible within the context of the same event. As I hope to demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the same occasion of musical consumption, rather than framing the collective meanings of one particular group, can act as a backdrop for a range of competing discourses regarding the ownership and use of social space.

If occasions of music consumption are characterised by competing social discourses, then the same is true for the meanings attached to particular genres of music in specific localities. Chambers, in an early acknowledgement of the power of the local in informing musical meanings, pointed out that: "The same music, the same record, can be crossed by different cultural pressures and requests, diverse pleasures" (1985, p.211). Later work, however, has failed to acknowledge such a view and its implications for the claims which are routinely made concerning the music's social significance. Indeed, this shortcoming is clearly evident in the accounts of local music cultures considered above. Thus, for example, in Rose's work on hip hop, while her account may be an accurate description of hip hop as a form of street culture in New York, it is at the same time somewhat static in that it makes no mention of the other forms of cultural investment in the social use of hip hop occurring elsewhere in the city.

Indeed, in some respects Rose's account neatly corresponds with the narrative stance of subcultural theory. Apart from the fact that her arguments are largely conjectural, in as much as they are offered without any form of recourse to exponents of hip hop, contentions such as "hip hop style *is* black urban renewal" carry with them the implication that the ontology of black inner-city America is hip hop's only authentic text, that such circumstances provide the only grounds on which the hip hop style may be used to stage an 'authentic' cultural response (1994, p.85). In chapter five, which, as I have previously stated, presents a comparative analysis of hip hop in Newcastle and Frankfurt, I will challenge this assumption. During the course of chapter five, I will be concerned not only to illustrate the essential relationship between notions of hip hop authenticity and locality, but will also endeavour to show how, even in the context of a given local

hip hop scene, a number of competing 'versions' of hip hop authenticity will be present, each of these versions articulating a particular form of local experience.

### Writing 'local' cultures?

That the impact of the local upon the social use of music has been largely under-represented in the study of popular music is due in some ways perhaps to the perceived intangibility and subliminal nature of this process. Clearly, there is an element of truth in such a perception. As evidenced in Cohen's (1991) study, instances of local music production such as Merseybeat clearly imbibe a strong and easily discernible conscious emotional investment in particular representations of local spaces. It is, however, difficult to make the same claims of the nuances present in local patterns of music consumption. Thus, there is perhaps a fear amongst researchers that they will, to use Clifford's words become "caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (1986, p.2). The point remains, however, that little attention has been paid to this issue. References to local patterns of music consumption are rarely included into studies of popular music's local significance and even notable exceptions such as Chambers's account of the para-local phenomenon of Northern Soul tend to be strictly narrative in detail.<sup>5</sup> On the strength of my own ethnographically based research into local patterns of musical consumption, however, it does seem to me that consumers are in general more aware of the local arrangements around which their musical worlds are arranged than is generally acknowledged. At the most fundamental level, individuals will often identify their motives or offer justification for preferring a particular style or styles using a characteristically local frame of reference. Pickering and Green have argued that social actors

...selectively and creatively adopt and adapt particular songs according to their own criteria of how they can serve their own 'way of thinking and feeling' ... Songs (they go on to suggest) constitute ways of handling the empirically experienced world, as do all imaginative acts and relationships ... supporting or challenging 'how things are', or how they are represented ideologically (1987, p.3).

Indeed, as subsequent chapters will endeavour to show, in some instances musical tastes and accompanying consumption patterns are quite deliberately fashioned in such a way as to enable the clear articulation of collective attitudes or statements

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<sup>5</sup> See Chambers (1985, pp.142-150).

which respond directly to situations encountered in a specific locality. Moreover, while such messages are sometimes transmitted in a publicly visible and/or audible fashion through the mediums of dress and musical preference, they are also frequently circulated only in the context of closed communication systems existing between those who choose to participate in specific events. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Newcastle's 'urban dance music' scene. As chapter three reveals, through their participation in select 'club' events and privately arranged 'informal' house parties, the members of this scene celebrate a shared underground sensibility which is designed to challenge the perceived oppression and archaism of Newcastle's official night-time economy.

Before concluding this chapter, a point of clarification is necessary regarding my concentration upon local music cultures. It occurs to me that the reader, having noted my argument that the social significance of popular music and style, despite their mass cultural characteristics, can only be adequately understood in the context of the local situations in which they are appropriated and used, might be tempted to see a connection between this argument and the cultural theorist's frequently used contrast pair of 'tradition' and 'innovation'. The implied notion here that tradition is inherently a good thing while innovation, that is massification, is inherently bad has been a constant feature of cultural studies writing since the 1950s. Hoggart (1957) was particularly pessimistic regarding what he saw as the Americanisation of Britain, and particularly British youth, during the immediate post-war period referring to the desire of the British public for American consumer goods as a "shiny barbarism" (p. 160).

Williams (1958), although sharing Hoggart's opinion, presented a slightly more 'optimistic' account of British society's reaction to post-war massification. Thus, he argued, the mass culturalisation of British life would not be a straightforward process but would take the form of an ongoing struggle, a long revolution, in which individuals would resist the argued blandness and facelessness of mass culturalisation by holding onto the vestiges of traditional life or, alternatively, using such forms of traditional life in order to raise new structures of meaning for mass produced items. Williams's developed this view using the concept of *residual* and *emergent* cultures, in which, it is argued, the collective practices "of some previous cultural formation", together with the "new meanings and practices (which) are continually being created" and which may counter the intended meanings of mass cultural products, act as forms of opposition to massification (1980, pp.41-42). Indeed, Williams's work was highly influential upon the CCCS theorists who used

the notion of residual and emergent cultures to explain the various forms of working class resistance which they identified among the 'so-called' post-war youth subcultures and their uses of mass cultural products.

In situating my own work around the study of local music cultures, however, it should not be assumed that I will be concerned to preserve this trend in cultural studies writing. On the contrary, as subsequent chapters will serve to illustrate, if studies of the 'local' reveal crucial information concerning the social milieu of music use, they also reveal the high level of romanticism inherent in those studies which routinely assume that traditional life is 'good' or 'natural' while innovation, deemed to be the 'engineered' design of an exploitative capitalist system, has a purely pathological effect on social life. Indeed, in each of the ethnographic studies presented here, such representations of the effects of mass culturalisation are completely overturned. In my respective accounts of urban dance music, bhangra, hip hop and progressive rock there are clear instances of popular cultural resources being used to an emancipatory effect in the face of local cultures and vestiges of tradition which are unequivocally oppressive.

In the course of this chapter I have been concerned to do two things. In the first instance I have charted the development of popular music studies and noted how, for the most part, such work has tended to produce abstract, essentialist models which, I have argued, are wholly unsatisfactory as approaches to studying the social significance of popular music. Subsequently I have begun to rethink some of the claims which are currently being made about the nature of local music cultures. It has been my central contention that, although the theoretical conceptualisation of local music cultures is still in its early stages, there is a tendency on the part of social theorists to overgeneralise about the composition of the latter. I have further suggested that forms of popular music and their accompanying stylistic innovations are in every instance consumed and appropriated within a range of competing and overlapping local discourses which will strongly influence the ways in which music is used and identities of style lived out within any given local setting. In doing so, I have begun to establish the theoretical approach within which the rest of this study will be framed. In subsequent chapters I will attempt to map out more precisely the relationship between locality and the social uses of popular music which I have begun to consider here.

## Part II

### Local representations



## Introduction

In the first part of this study I began to rethink, with reference to existing literature sources, the relationship which is seen to exist between youth culture and popular music. In chapter one, I was concerned primarily with the concept of subcultural theory and attempted to demonstrate how the dominance of the latter in sociological thinking and writing about youth during the past twenty-five years has led to an erroneous structuralist conceptualisation of the relationship between youth and post-war style. In doing so I suggested that the more recent work on 'lifestyles' by theorists such as Shields (1992) and Chaney (1994, 1996) together with the Maffesollian (1996) concept of *tribus* (tribes) offers a much more viable explanation of the types of sensibilities which inform the construction of collective youthful identities in that they allow for the more autonomous nature of the individual in modern consumer society. In chapter two, through an illustration of competing notions of musical 'authenticity' and in introducing the concept of taste cultures, I attempted to demonstrate the significance of popular music as a cultural resource which is appropriated by various groups and used in the construction of lifestyles. I also put forward and began to explore the theoretical premise that although such forms of social identity are independent of structural conditions, they are at the same time bound by the social and spatial organisation of locality, that is to say, by the day to day context of the local social reality in which such identities are lived out.

In many ways this shift from subcultural theory to an analysis of lifestyles and the forms of local knowledge which give rise to particular lifestyle orientations can be seen as part of a wider movement in cultural studies towards viewing audiences as 'active' participants in the construction of popular culture meanings. The notion of the 'active audience' contests the previously held view, propagated by early work on mass culture and in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (see chapter two), which stated that audience responses were, in each case, tightly controlled by the media and popular culture industries, that audiences were in effect 'cultural dupes'. In recent years there has been a realisation among cultural theorists that such a deterministic, 'top down' interpretation has little relevance for the actuality of audience consumption, that such deterministic models of audience involvement exist only at the level of theoretical abstraction while in reality audience responses hinge upon a variety of factors which are both shifting and unpredictable. Thus, as Ang argues:

'The audience' no longer represents simply an 'object of study', a reality 'out there' constitutive of and reserved for the discipline which claims ownership of it, but has to be defined first and foremost as a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption (1996, p.4).

For the most part, the concept of the 'active audience' has been applied to studies of television and film while little attention has been focussed upon its use in redefining the ways in which audiences derive meaning and significance from popular music and its attendant stylistic resources. Clearly, however, there are obvious parallels between Ang's conceptualisation of the active audience and the alternative approach to the study of popular music's social significance which I have begun to sketch out in part one of this study. Thus, in part two I will endeavour to demonstrate more fully the value of the notion of the active audience for our understanding of the complex and multifarious relationships which exist between popular music and those who consume it. Using the concepts of lifestyle and local knowledge as a way of framing an exploration of audiences' active construction of meaning around popular music and style, during the course of the next four chapters I will consider the various forms of meaning which are read into four contemporary popular music styles - urban dance music, bhangra, hip hop and progressive rock - within the context of one provincial British city, Newcastle upon Tyne (with the exception of chapter five which also draws upon empirical work conducted in Frankfurt am Main, Germany).

In any study which attempts to portray the contemporary social actor as an active participant in the construction of popular cultural meanings there is the ever-present danger of casting or being perceived to cast the individual in the role of a 'cultural hero' possessed with the power to overturn all of the 'intended' meanings of popular culture resources and to use such resources in a completely autonomous fashion (McGuigan: 1992). In positing contemporary youth as an active audience, however, I am not suggesting that popular music resources will be used by young people in a way which completely abandons the forms of meaning which are inscribed in them by the popular music industries. It is rather my intention to illustrate how commercially generated objects such as CDs, vinyl records, clothes and styles of dance, together with the meanings which are attached to these at the commercial level, are taken up and creatively adapted by young people in particular localities. Similarly, I am not suggesting that such

processes of appropriation become so subjective that they defy any form of objective sociological reading. It is rather the case that these processes are locally bound, that is, they act in ways which correspond with particular forms of social conflict, struggle and oppression as these are encountered and understood in given localities. Thus, as Ang points out in her work on television audiences, the latter

... appropriate television in ways suitable to their situated practices of living ... (the) appropriative power of the audience is the power of the weak; it is the power not to change or overturn imposed structures, but to negotiate the potentially oppressive effects of those structures where they cannot be overthrown, where they have to be lived with (1996, p.8).

A similar observation is made by Thompson who, in a further study of the ways in which audiences actively work on media resources to create their own meanings, has argued that:

The appropriation of media products is always a localized phenomenon, in the sense that it always involves specific individuals who are situated in particular socio-historical contexts, and who draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of media messages and incorporate them into their lives. And messages are often transformed in the process of appropriation as individuals adapt them to the contexts of everyday life (1995, p.174).

Similarly localised patterns of appropriation are evident in each of the four ethnographic studies which make up the following section of this study. As I will go on to demonstrate, the commercial musical styles which feature in these studies have their own national and, in some cases international, stories to tell. Nevertheless, as my research illustrates, these stories have in each case been taken up and reworked by young people in ways which address the particular local circumstances in which they find themselves. Thus, in chapter three, forms of contemporary urban dance music, such as *house*, *techno* and *jungle*, the latter already steeped in controversy due to their associations with drug use and illegal mass gatherings in disused inner-city buildings, are seen to be used by urban dance music enthusiasts in Newcastle in a way which contests the city's traditional night-time economy, dominated by a male-orientated drinking culture, and the coercive strategies of the local police force. In chapter four the Asian folk-pop fusion style 'bhangra', said by both journalists and academics to be the soundtrack for an Asian youth subculture in Britain, is used in a complex and often contradictory

series of ways by young Asians in Newcastle. On the one hand bhangra is used by young Asians to articulate a continuing attachment to traditional forms of Asian life in a local environment which remains acutely hostile to ethnic minority groups. On the other hand it signifies the attempts by many young Asians to break away from the restrictions of traditional Asian life and the racist stereotypes which are imposed upon them by local white youth. In chapter five I expand the remit of my research somewhat to present a comparative study of how the globally established genre of hip hop has been taken up and adapted by young people in Newcastle and in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. In the case of Frankfurt, hip hop is seen to provide a powerful soundtrack for statements concerning the extreme racism, both popular and statutory, which is deemed to hold sway in the city, whilst in Newcastle local hip hoppers consider themselves to be social commentators, delivering cutting statements on what they perceive as the 'narrow-mindedness' of the typical Geordie mentality. Finally, chapter six examines how, via the live performances of a local Pink Floyd 'tribute' band, Pink Floyd music is becoming interwoven with the pub and club culture of the North East where it plays a role in the maintenance of kinship and friendship networks whilst simultaneously being used as a way of celebrating the Geordie identity in the face of local hardship.

### Chapter 3

#### **Night moves: Urban dance music, neo-tribalism and local space**

In the course of this chapter, I want to begin to explore the links between musical appropriation, lifestyles and the nature of locality more extensively via an examination of the sensibilities which underpin the collective consumption of urban dance music<sup>1</sup> in Newcastle upon Tyne, the city in which the majority of my research was conducted. In many respects, the issue of contemporary urban dance music provides an ideal starting point for an empirical investigation of modern consumer lifestyles, as these are expressed through musical taste, and the interaction of such lifestyles with forms of local knowledge. While it is a relatively new phenomenon, urban dance music has already attracted the attention of a number of theorists who have argued that the eclectic nature of the music has in its own way contributed to the break up of the posited subcultural tradition by merging the allegedly distinct musical sensibilities which previously served to drive wedges between youth groups and delineate the so-called subcultural boundaries.

Similarly, although initially characterised by a series of informal and illegal mass gatherings in disused inner-city industrial buildings and remote rural locations, concentrated media attention and police intervention, culminating in the recent implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, has resulted in urban dance music activities fragmenting into a number of localised settings. Consequently, while it is still commonplace to speak in terms of an urban dance music *scene*, the reality of this description is a series of disparate urban dance music sensibilities dispersed over a number of sites. Moreover, if urban dance music has always involved the re-appropriation of urban and, to some extent, suburban space, then the localisation of the former has served to open up a more nuanced form of discourse between notions of space and identity. Indeed, for reasons which will be explored in more depth later, in the case of the local urban dance music scene in Newcastle upon Tyne, the particular social context of the city has resulted in this scene adopting a distinctly underground sensibility.

My analysis of urban dance music is presented in three stages. In the first stage I want to focus upon the nature of urban dance music itself. Having briefly

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<sup>1</sup> Urban dance music denotes a range of technology driven contemporary dance musics, such as *jungle*, *house* and *techno*. Some writers extend the definition of urban dance music to include diaspora musics such as *rap* and *bhangra*. In the context of this study, however, because of the distinctive cultural work performed by rap and bhangra, they will be discussed elsewhere.

examined its origins, I will then go on to consider some of the stylistic qualities which underpin this form of music, particularly its deeply eclectic nature, which as I will demonstrate, is the result of relatively recent technological advances in the processes of musical composition and production. In the second stage I will go on to argue that, while this eclecticism has given urban dance music a broad appeal, indicated by the range of different style groups which converge at urban dance music events, rather than signalling the break up of some former subcultural tradition, the music simply serves to highlight the shifting and eclectic sensibilities of style and taste which have characterised the consumption and appropriation of popular music styles since the post-war era. Finally, I will argue in the third stage that, although serving as a pertinent example of the autonomous and reflexive nature of consumption in modern society, urban dance music sensibilities as with the sensibilities which underpin other forms of contemporary popular music still need to be considered within the context of the particular local settings in which they are lived out, such local settings providing the basis for the forms of collective expression which these sensibilities are used to articulate. Thus, with reference to selected empirical examples drawn from my own study of the local urban dance music scene in Newcastle, I will endeavour to demonstrate how the sensibilities which inform this scene are infused with forms of local knowledge and experience shared by those individuals who participate in it. In particular, I will be concerned to illustrate how local urban dance music enthusiasts use their acquired musical taste as a way of resisting the felt oppressions of particular cultural and statutory institutions which combine to shape the character of Newcastle nightlife.

#### **Acid house and the 'second' summer of love**

The urban dance music scene in Britain is generally argued to date back to 1987 with the beginnings of 'acid house' and the series of illegal festivals or *raves* which followed in its wake, the so-called 'Summer of Love'. 'House' music, a style in which existing dance music tracks are 'mixed' together to produce entirely new sounds and tonal textures, was pioneered by DJs in Chicago gay clubs during the late-70s. House was first heard by groups of young British people in dance clubs on the island of Ibiza during the mid 80s. According to Melechi, young British holiday makers who had grown tired of the over-anglicised character of the island's main resort, San Antonio, travelled "beyond the brochure to Ibiza Town ... where the tourist could enjoy anonymity whilst settling into the twelve hour cycle of clubbing" in which an "eclectic mishmash of Peter Gabriel, Public Enemy, Jibaro and the Woodentops (was) fused together" (1993, p.31). Upon its arrival

in British clubs, house music became married up with a stylistic convention which involved the taking of drugs such as LSD<sup>2</sup> and the then newly available amphetamine based stimulant Ecstasy or 'E' (Rietveld: 1993, p.42).<sup>3</sup> This resulted in the coining of the term *acid house* by media journalists who immediately saw comparisons between this drug orientated musical style and the psychedelic movement of the mid 1960s (Russell: 1993). Moreover, as a direct consequence of the media attention which was focussed upon it, acid house and the rave scene which it was inspiring became the centre of a new moral panic (Thornton: 1994). Nightclubs which featured rave events were subject to random spot checks by the police and in some cases had their licenses revoked (Redhead: 1993a). Similarly, in 1991 Graham Bright MP's Pay Parties (Increased Penalties) Act outlawed the staging of large scale unlicensed raves and warehouse parties which were duly replaced by "over-priced commercial events".<sup>4</sup> Further restrictions were placed upon the rave scene with the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, particularly section 63 of the Act which gives the police authority "to remove persons attending or preparing for a rave" (p.44). According to the Act, a rave may be classed as any "gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music is played during the night" (ibid.). The Act further states that "'land in the open air' includes a place partly open to the air" while "'music' includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (pp.44-45).

While the imposition of such legal sanctions has made the staging of large-scale rave events more difficult, the musical styles which rave helped to establish have continued to flourish. Indeed, since the early 90s the term *rave* has become increasingly redundant as urban dance music has fragmented into a number of distinctive styles, a scenario which is effectively captured by The Face magazine in an article entitled "A Bluffer's Guide to Dance Music in the 1990s" (1993). Contemporary urban dance music now includes forms such as *techno*, *garage*, *ambient*, *jungle* and *handbag* in addition to house which has itself become fragmented into a range of different forms including *deep house*, *piano house*, *happy house* and *hard house*. Moreover, this fragmentation of the urban dance music scene is occurring on a scale previously unwitnessed in the history of post-

<sup>2</sup> LSD is the popular abbreviation for lysergic acid diethylamide, a hallucinogenic drug widely used by the hippie movement during the mid sixties psychedelic era.

<sup>3</sup> For informed studies of the drug 'Ecstasy' see Merchant and MacDonald (1994) and Saunders (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Information and quotation taken from the article "Tribal and Strife" by Andrew Smith, featured in The Guardian, May 8th 1995.

war popular music, a fact which continues to puzzle the mainstream music industry. Thus, as John Preston, the chairman of BMG which owns Arista and RCA records, has pointed out: "We'd all love to find a new punk, a new unifying movement, but rock is continually rebelling against itself with more sub-categories".<sup>5</sup> While this situation in itself presents no threat to the mainstream industry - commercially produced urban dance music tracks can and do regularly enter the charts - what it does begin to reveal is that the rational which has traditionally informed the mainstream music industry, in which emphasis is placed upon the production and marketing of popular music forms as distinct categories, is considerably different from that of the urban dance music scene, the latter becoming increasingly deconstructionist in its attitude towards musical distinction and categorisation. Thus, as an urban dance music DJ in Newcastle recently explained to me: *"The way it stands at the moment, music's all about boundaries, this goes over here, and that fits in there. I'm into smashing those boundaries to pieces man"*.

It seems to me, however, that if urban dance music is itself a relatively new phenomenon, then the sensibility of musical eclecticism which underpins it is not. Rather, it simply follows on from a long established pattern of music consumption which began to flourish when music as a resource became more widely available through the associated mediums of recording, radio and TV, the union of the latter being cemented by the consumer boom of the post-war years. Post-war popular music, by its very nature, has offered the consumer the opportunity to pick and choose between a variety of artists, genres and styles. With the arrival of urban dance music, or rather the rapid increases in music technology which underlie its production and the changing patterns in the availability of this technology, the eclectic tastes of modern popular music consumers have recently found heightened modes of expression.

#### **'It's all in the mix': Urban dance music and technology**

In order to begin to understand more fully the eclectic sensibilities which characterise the production of urban dance music, it is necessary in the first instance to briefly consider the technological innovations in music recording which gave rise to the compositional techniques pioneered by urban dance music artists and DJs. The major breakthrough in the process of recording came during the

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the article "Hi-Tech Change Rocks the World of Pop" by Melinda Wittstock, featured in *The Times*, October 12th 1993.



1960s with the invention of multi-track recording which facilitated the layering of independently created sounds over the top of each other. As Frith explains: “Producers could now work on the tape itself to ‘record’ a performance that was actually put together from numerous, quite separate events, happening at different times” (1988a, p. 22). As a consequence of this, the recording studio was freed of its ‘functional’ role as simply a means of capturing a live performance on tape and came to be viewed increasingly as a form of music-making in itself. This was accompanied by the realisation that music produced in a studio “need no longer bear any relationship to anything that can be performed live” (ibid.). The first commercially available record to both utilise and demonstrate the potential of the recording studio as a musical instrument in itself was the Beatles’ 1967 release ‘Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band’.<sup>6</sup> For a period during the late 1960s this album set an important trend as many rock bands, following the Beatles’ example, became more studio orientated in their approach to musical composition. Significantly, however, while many such bands subsequently reverted back to producing more *live* sounding albums or, alternatively, utilised parallel developments in P.A.<sup>7</sup> and sound processing techniques to re-create their studio crafted albums in a live context, ‘studio-music’ increasingly became the domain of electro-pop exponents, such as Giorgio Moroder and Vangelis, and experimental avant-garde artists, notably Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, Brian Eno and Tomita, who continued to expand the limits of recording technology. Indeed, many contemporary urban dance music producers and DJs claim to have been heavily influenced by such artists.

It was with the invention of digital recording during the early 1980s, however, that the true foundations were laid for the current urban dance music scene. Digital technology altered the nature of the recording process in two important ways. Firstly, it allowed for sound to be stored in a computer memory, thus eliminating the earlier problem of ‘tape hiss’<sup>8</sup> as well as enabling a more accurate level of synchronisation between instruments and sounds recorded at different times. Secondly, digital technology also facilitated the development of a computerised ‘triggering’ system referred to as MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). MIDI enables a musical instrument or sound to be interfaced, that is connected,

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth account of the making of ‘Sergeant Pepper’ see Martin and Hornsby (1979, pp.199-219).

<sup>7</sup> P.A. is the abbreviated term for ‘Public Address’, an elaborate system of amplifiers, loudspeakers and sound processing equipment used in a concert situation to convey the sound of a group or performer’s music to the audience as accurately as possible.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Tape hiss’ refers to the extraneous white noise accumulated on multi-track tape from sources such as electronic instruments, microphones and sound processing effects.

with an infinite number of *samples*<sup>9</sup> with the effect that when the given instrument is played or the sound produced, each of the sampled sounds are also simultaneously triggered. Thus, as Negus points out, MIDI allows for music to be made “within a computer’s memory without the need of an acoustic environment in the studio. Hence, a composition could be produced in a confined space via the technology and the mixing desk. ‘Studio’ quality recording can now (therefore) take place in any location” (1992, p.25). Indeed, as high quality digital technology has become cheaply available, musical production, particularly in the case of urban dance music, has become increasingly decentralised. Thus, while urban dance music continues to be a commercial concern, there are in addition a growing number of *home or bedroom recording studio* enthusiasts producing music of a quality comparable with that which is created in professional studios. I will examine this aspect of urban dance music production in more detail later. Firstly, however, I want to consider in more depth the effect which digital technology has had upon the nature of popular music itself and how this has been manifested in the style of urban dance music.

I have noted above how digital production techniques allow for a much wider manipulation of sound sources than was previously possible. Indeed, by means of sampling, previously recorded sounds can be removed from their original contexts and reworked into alternative soundscapes. Clearly then, sampling has far reaching implications for accepted notions of musical style in that it allows the contemporary composer to appropriate sounds from a range of different musical styles sources and subsequently re-use the latter in creating an entirely new piece of music. Thus, for example, 80s exponents of the sample constructed dance mix, the JAMs, later to re-emerge as the KLF, created tracks such as ‘The Queen and I’ which fused snatches of Abba and The Sex Pistols together with the British National Anthem, and ‘Whitney Joins The JAMs’ which featured samples from Whitney Houston’s ‘I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)’, Isaac Hayes’s ‘Theme from Shaft’ and the theme music from the 70s cult US television series ‘Mission Impossible’ (Beadle: 1993, pp.111-112). During the 90s, dance music producers and DJs have continued to develop the art of working with samples to the extent that whole bass lines, drum patterns, vocal and instrumental passages from widely varying sources can now be sampled and seamlessly re-combined. In the following extract an amateur dance music producer from

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<sup>9</sup> A sample is a digitally stored sound, musical or otherwise. Popular ‘samples’ include orchestral and piano sounds, drum sounds, industrial noise and everyday sounds such as traffic, birdsong and breaking glass.

Newcastle who I interviewed in the course of my research describes his own particular approach to composition:

*When I start to write I try to get a rhythm track down first and then work from there. Sometimes I can get something together myself and sometimes I just take someone else's drum loop. For example, the thing that's playing in the background at the moment is taken from a Black Sabbath song. So, I'm using that drum loop to trigger some of my own samples. Then I'll programme in my own bass line. After that I might add some brass stabs into the track, let's say for argument's sake from an old Motown track. Then I might sample some pan pipes or a good sixties guitar break from somewhere and use that a couple of times in the track as well.*

I have already begun to argue in chapter two and in the introduction to this section of my study that mass cultural products and resources, rather than acting to subvert forms of particularised cultural expression, can have a positive emancipatory effect on the latter. In a recent study Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley attempt to construe the liberating quality of mass culture within a theoretical framework characterised by what they refer to as 'public' and 'private' spheres. Thus, they argue: "Objects and meanings, technologies and media ...cross the diffuse and shifting boundary between the public sphere where they are produced and distributed, and the private sphere where they are appropriated into a personal economy of meaning" (1992, p.18). Reimer also uses the notion of 'public' and 'private' spheres in order to illustrate the increasing sophistication evident in media audiences' active uses of the resources which they appropriate from the public sphere. According to Reimer, "if the media once gathered the family together in front of the radio or television set, now there is a differentiation of everyday life in the private sphere. With several radios and televisions, and with music apparatus in more than one room, the use of media - and in extension, the whole of leisure - is more and more individualised" (1995b, p.63).

It seems to me, however, that the craft of the urban dance music producer calls into question this division between public and private spheres as the crucial key to our understanding of how mass culture functions to liberate modern individuals. In this particular instance, it is not simply that commodities made available in the public sphere are being appropriated into the private sphere, thus facilitating a form of individualised creativity. It is rather the case that a large-scale blurring between the public and private spheres takes place. Thus urban dance music

producers, although temporarily appropriating musical resources into the private sphere where they are creatively reworked, subsequently introduce such 'reworkings' back into the public sphere. Moreover, it is in the public sphere where such reworked musical compositions perform their most important cultural work. As I will subsequently go on to demonstrate more fully, urban dance music enthusiasts use such reconstituted musical pieces to symbolically mark themselves out from other taste cultures, to publicly articulate their collectively felt sense of exclusivity.

Indeed, the 'cut and mix' nature of urban dance music also forces a more fundamental questioning of popular music's social significance for young people as this has traditionally been represented in the respective sociologies of youth and popular music. Interestingly, many popular music theorists have considered urban dance music, or rather the recording and sampling techniques upon which it is based, primarily in terms of the challenge which this is seen to pose to notions of authorship. Thus, for example, Frith has argued that "what is going on here is the systematic dismantling of the belief system that sustained rock 'n' roll, the idea that a recognizable person (or group of persons) made a specific noise" (1988b, p.124). It seems to me, however, that what is at issue here is not the origins or ownership of a piece of music - as will be demonstrated shortly, for the most part, urban dance music consumers continue to associate the musical fragments heard in urban dance mixes with their original composers or performers. Rather, urban dance music prizes open the whole issue of musical taste itself. Similarly, theorists of youth culture, in noting the visual style mixing which occurs at urban dance music events, have suggested that the arrival of urban dance music has lead to a break up in the posited subcultural tradition as young people are seen to become increasingly eclectic in their musical tastes. Redhead, for example, in discussing the impact of *acid house* upon youth has observed how it lead to a "mixing (of) all kinds of styles on the same dance floor . . . attracting a range of previously opposed subcultures from football hooligans to New Age hippies" (1993b, p.4).

Again, however, I would argue that such interpretations of the effects of urban dance music are oversimplistic. Indeed, to simply suggest that urban dance music has been responsible for a shift in the relationship between visual style and musical taste, without recourse to the nature of the music itself, is to do little more than repeat the oversight evident in subcultural theory in which music becomes something of an empty vessel, merely a form of appendage to the visual style of youth. Urban dance music challenges the oversights inherent in the above

observations of Frith and Redhead by forcing the question of how music is actually *heard* by consumers. In doing so it also opens up new ways of understanding how young people perceive the relationship between musical taste and visual style, undermining the orderly interpretation imposed on the latter by subcultural theory and revealing instead an ever-shifting cultural collage, a world of stylistic fragments where the arbitrary incidence of signifiers is taken for granted.

### Urban dance music and neo-tribalism

Young men with shaved heads and pigtails, stripped to the waist, are executing vaguely oriental hand movements. Freeze-framed by strobes in clouds of dry ice, revivalist hippies and mods are swaying in the maelstrom. Rastas, ragga girls, ravers there is no stylistic cohesion to the assembly, as there would have been in the (g)olden days of youth culture. So what is this noise that has united these teenage tribes?<sup>10</sup>

In chapter one I suggested that the recent work on consumerism and lifestyle together with the Maffesolian concept of 'tribes' offered a more viable basis for the analysis of contemporary notions of youthful identity than subcultural theory due to their acknowledgement of the autonomous nature of the modern consumer. It is my further contention that the forms of urban dance music currently under consideration provide an effective empirical illustration of the more fluid notions of identity posited in these related theoretical concepts. In particular, urban dance music graphically demonstrates the value of Maffesoli's theory of tribalisation as an analytical model for the study of the relationship between identity, style and musical taste. There has been some disagreement among theorists as to how the concept of tribalism can most effectively be used as a model for the explanation of the collective lifestyle orientations which characterise contemporary society. In his foreword to the English translation of Maffesoli's study, Shields (1996) argues that *tribus* are "best understood as 'postmodern tribes' or even pseudo-tribes" (p.x). Heatherington (1992), however, prefers the term neo-tribes. For the purposes of this study, I too refer to *tribus* as neo-tribes as this seems to me to most accurately describe the social processes with which Maffesoli was concerned.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted from the article "The Lost Tribes: Rave Culture" by Tim Willis, featured in The Sunday Times, July 18th 1993.

Coincidentally, within the urban dance music scene itself there is a heavy reliance upon the use of tribal images and terminology. Hesmondhalgh (1995), for example, has drawn attention to the images of tribalism and primitivism evident in the names of urban dance music artists such as Loop Guru, while *jungle*, the latest form of urban dance music to emerge, demonstrates the continuing centrality of the tribal theme. Similarly, in May 1995 Otmoor park near Oxford was the site of a large outdoor commercially organised dance party entitled the UK Tribal Gathering 95.<sup>11</sup> The notion of neo-tribalism, however, conceptualises the term *tribe* in a rather different sense to the more familiar anthropological usage which informs its various appropriations and applications within the urban dance music scene. As I have previously pointed out in chapter one, Maffesoli was concerned to use the concept of the 'tribe' to illustrate the shifting nature of collective associations between individuals as societies become increasingly consumer orientated (1996, pp.97-98). Thus, as Heatherington in discussing Maffesoli's work has pointed out, tribalisation involves "the deregulation through modernization and individualization of the modern forms of solidarity and identity based on class occupation, locality and gender ... and the recomposition into 'tribal' identities and forms of sociation" (1992, p.93). Shields, in a further evaluation of Maffesoli's work points out how such tribal identities serve to illustrate the temporal nature of collective identities in modern consumer society as individuals continually move between different sites of collective expression and 'reconstruct' themselves accordingly. Thus, argues Shields: "Personas are 'unfurled' and mutually adjusted. The performative orientation toward the Other in these sites of social centrality and sociality draws people together one by one. Tribe-like but temporary groups and circles condense out of the homogeneity of the mass" (1992b, p.108).

In my view, such processes of tribalisation, as these relate to sensibilities of style and musical taste, have been highlighted considerably by the current urban dance music scene. As I have already illustrated, through its use of new types of technology, urban dance music has both radically altered approaches to musical composition and challenged existing notions of musical style. Indeed, it is worth noting at this point that such compositional trends no longer pertain merely to the urban dance music scene but are now seen to routinely inform artists working out of a range of other genres. Thus, for example, new age band The Levellers combine Irish folk sounds with heavy metal and punk guitar styles and blues

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<sup>11</sup> Taken from the article "Tribal and Strife", by Andrew Smith, featured in The Guardian, May 8th 1995.

harmonica, as well as incorporating more exotic instruments such as the Aboriginal didgeridoo. Similarly, a review of contemporary classical composer Anne Dudley's 1995 album 'Ancient and Modern' has commented upon the way in which the latter combines the influence of the English choral and pastoral traditions with "an eclectic mix which fuses elements from the world of commercial music".<sup>12</sup>

As I have pointed out above, such shifts in the compositional techniques of music makers have been seen to elicit parallel shifts in the consumption patterns of music listeners. Thus, it is argued, the increasing eclecticism of contemporary music and the sampled soundtracks of urban dance mixes are breaking open and redefining conventional notions of musical taste as the individual enters a "technological dreamscape of ... reconstituted sound" (Melechi: 1993, p.34). It seems to me, however, that such new compositional techniques, rather than radically altering the way in which consumers respond to music, are themselves rooted in the consumption habits of modern music consumers. Sifting through various types of music, artists and sounds made available by the modern popular music industry, consumers characteristically choose songs and instrumental pieces which appeal to them with the effect that the stylistic boundaries existing between the latter become rather less important than the meaning which the chosen body of music as a whole assumes for the listener. Arguably, with the development of digital recording technology such forms of musical appropriation have been more forcibly demonstrated as contemporary composers and DJs, who are themselves working out of such eclectic consumer sensibilities, redirect the latter back into the processes of composition and performance.

Thus, rather than signifying the onset of a form of postmodern fragmentation in the tastes of music consumers, it could be argued that urban dance music, as with other forms of contemporary music, draws upon and thus serves to underline an established and fundamental aspect of popular music consumption. Significantly, when the first urban dance music tracks began to appear there seemed to exist a ready made audience who displayed no apparent objections to the music's transcendence of conventional style boundaries. Indeed, a major aspect of urban dance music's continuing appeal appears to revolve around the consonance of its blatant appropriation and re-assembling of stylistically diffuse hooks, riffs<sup>13</sup> and

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted from The Guardian, February 17th 1995.

<sup>13</sup> A *riff* is the term given to a short sequence of repeated notes, generally, but not always, played on an electric guitar or bass and which can be said to characterise the song or piece of music in

melodic phrases with the musical knowledges and sensibilities of its consumers. This latter observation is supported in the following extracts taken from interviews which I conducted with urban dance music enthusiasts in Newcastle:

#### Extract One

*Rick: There's this club night thing once a week in Glasgow where they have some really good music on, it's more like a kind of acid house kind of thing. I've been there a couple of times. I was up there the other week and they dropped Bob Marley's 'Exodus' in the middle of this fast rave thing ... it was like 'boom' (stamps foot to indicate a change in music's tempo and sings "exodus") and everybody went 'whoa'. You know, everyone's off their faces on drugs and that so when they drop that in it's like whoa this is great ... and it lasts for a couple of seconds and then the other stuff blasts right back in again. And it's like 'great, what's happening next?'.*

#### Extract Two

*A.B.: Dance music DJs put snatches of well known pop songs into their mixes don't they?*

*John: Yeah, such as they'll be playing something quite hard and then they'll put something like Michael Jackson in ... you know what I mean ... and it's not like people think 'oh no' you know 'Michael Jackson' and clear the dance floor ... it's just like 'oh yeah I recognise that, it's Michael Jackson'.*

*Susan: If it's done well, if it's chosen well (by the DJ) and it fits in with the music then it's really excellent.*

To return then to the notion of neo-tribalism, what comments such as those presented above begin to reveal is that musical taste, in keeping with other lifestyle choices, is rather more loosely defined than has previously been supposed. The nature of musical taste as with music itself, it would seem, is both a multi-faceted and distinctly fluid form of expression. Music generates a range of moods and experiences which individuals are able to move freely between. Urban dance music, because of the style mixing involved in its production, serves to provide a

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which it is featured. Notable examples of riff-based songs include the Rolling Stones' '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' and, more recently, Michael Jackson's 1983 hit 'Beat It'.



series of 'snapshot' images of such fluid expressions of musical taste being exercised by consumers. Indeed, in many of the larger clubs which feature urban dance music nights, the desire of the consumer to choose from and engage with a variety of different musical moods has been further realised by using different rooms or floors as a means of staging a number of parallel events with club-goers free to move between these events as they please. Consequently, the nature of the urban dance music event is becoming increasingly a matter of individual choice, the type of music heard and the setting in which it is heard and danced to being very much the decision of the individual consumer. Significantly, such factors in turn have a marked influence on the way in which consumers of urban dance music talk about the actual process of musical consumption itself. Thus, for many this process appears to be regarded less as a coherent and structured event and more as a series of experiential encounters as they move between different dance floors engaging with different crowds and the musical moods of these crowds. This is clearly illustrated in the following extract from a group discussion extract in which I asked a number of regular attenders of a particular urban dance music clubnight in Newcastle to describe the nature of the event to me:

*A.B.: How would you describe 'Pigbag'? What kind of an event is it?*

*Diane: Well, I would say um, it's a different experience depending upon ...*

*Shelly: Upon what's on ...*

*Diane: What music's on and what floor you're on as well.*

*A.B.: I know there are different things going on on each floor.*

*All: Yeah.*

*Rob: There's three types of thing going on actually. There's like the sort of cafe room which plays hip hop and jazz and then downstairs there's more singing sort of house music ... and upstairs there's eh ... well how could you describe that?*

*Debbie: Well it's quite sort of eh ... the more housey end of techno music with sort of like trancey techno ... the sort of easier, comfortable side of techno.*

*Diane: Yeah and then you'll get people moving between all three floors and checking out what's going on.*

If the sensibilities of musical taste which are seen to characterise urban dance music events serve to challenge previous assumptions concerning the essential nature of musical taste then they simultaneously cast new light on the significance of the relationship between musical taste and style. As I have previously pointed out, the merging of visual styles first observed in the context of raves and subsequently at 'post-rave' club events has led many theorists to argue that the arrival of urban dance music has signalled an end to the alleged 'subcultural' tradition in which issues of style were said to be symbolically intertwined with sensibilities of musical taste. Clearly, however, a more viable form of explanation for the types of visual style-mixing observed at urban dance music events would be that if, as I have previously argued, such events allow for a fuller expression of the individual's musical tastes, then they also negate the notion of a fixed homological relationship between musical taste and stylistic preference by revealing the infinitely malleable and interchangeable nature of the latter as these are appropriated and realised by individuals as aspects of consumer choice. While this is not to completely dismiss the idea that a form of symmetry can exist between an individual's image and the nature of his/her taste in music, what it does serve to illustrate is that the relationship between musical taste and visual image is much less rigidly defined than was once thought. Indeed, as is evidenced by the following account, rather more fluid notions of musical taste and attendant visual image were in place long before the appearance of contemporary urban dance music forms. Thus, explains the interviewee

*... in the town where I grew up we were all rockers. We were leather clad, we were rockers. But it was during the punk thing and I used to like the Clash ... eh and I clearly remember Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love' being one of the best songs of '76 or whenever it was and really, really liking it ... and a lot of my friends liking it a lot as well, although it was actually still a bit weird to admit it ... because we were all into Zep (Led Zeppelin) and Sabbath (Black Sabbath) and Thin Lizzy and all the rest. But now you've got people like Leftfield or the Chemical Brothers who are quite happy to pick up very heavy metal guitar riffs and throw that into a dance mix ... or Primal Scream come along and they do a rock album and then other people get hold of that and remix that stuff and eh, people will go and listen to it and they're quite happy to dance to it ... I think dance music culture has allowed people to be quite open about the fact that they*

*actually quite like a lot of different stuff. I've never been able to understand the divisions in music. I'm quite happy to go from Orbital to Jimi Hendrix.*

Thus far I have been concerned to illustrate how, in studying the nature of contemporary urban dance music forms, a more accurate conceptualisation is possible of the factors which inform musical taste and visual style as these are expressed by individuals in modern consumer society. I have argued that the sensibilities which are seen to underpin the consumption of urban dance music in turn throw new light on wider patterns of post-war popular music consumption, revealing the distinctly fluid, neo-tribal characteristics of such forms of collective expression. There is, however, a further dimension of neo-tribalism which needs to be explored if this concept is to be successfully employed in studying the various musical and stylistic sensibilities which characterise contemporary youth, for if neo-tribes represent highly fluid and transient modes of collective identity then they are at the same time locally rooted phenomena. Thus, as Shields points out, in issuing statements against "the 'grand narratives' of hegemonic ideologies" neo-tribes "embrace . . . the 'local' authority of what is 'close to home', based on local territoriality; dependable and micro-social" (1992b, pp.108-109). With this in mind I want now to consider how the neo-tribal sensibilities associated with urban dance music map onto and are acted out in the context of my chosen research location, Newcastle upon Tyne.

### **Tribes of the underground: Urban dance music in Newcastle**

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, although the urban dance music scene initially centred around illegal mass gatherings in urban locations such as disused factories and warehouses, or alternatively in remote rural areas, the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and the new powers which this legislation grants the police to close down such events has resulted in the fragmentation of the wider urban dance music scene into a number of much smaller and more locally situated scenes and events. This in turn has necessitated the devising of a number of localised strategies for the collective appropriation and redesignation of urban space. Similarly, the character of each local urban dance music scene together with the ways in which these scenes are perceived both by participants and non-participants, will depend very much upon the forms of local knowledge which pertain to particular places and the types of information which such knowledges communicate to social actors concerning the significance of urban dance music. As the following pages will reveal, the local urban dance

music scene in Newcastle is characterised by a distinctive form of underground sensibility. Again, while the term 'underground' may generally be taken, in its socio-musical context, to imply "a grey area between music and social protest", it could be argued that the precise meaning of 'underground' will depend very much upon the nature of the particular social context in which it is articulated (Fountain: 1988, p.52). On the basis of my own research, it seems to me that the ideological touchstone for the underground sensibility which informs the urban dance music scene in Newcastle is the continual struggle in which enthusiasts in the city must engage in order to win space for the staging of urban dance music events and the various local interests which would appear to oppose, both directly and indirectly, the staging of such events.

It should be clear from my discussion of *social space* in chapter two that the latter is held to be distinct from the more traditional geographical definition of space. Thus, while the geographical definition of space concentrates purely upon its physical properties, that is, upon the notion of space as a fixed entity, the concept of *social space* moves beyond this definition by illustrating the changing and highly contested notion of space as it is continually appropriated and re-affirmed by diffuse and conflicting interest groups (Smith and Katz: 1993, p.69) (Shields: 1991, p.52). This interpretation of space as a contested property provides a useful starting point from which to begin to consider the social issues surrounding the urban dance music scene in Newcastle and the types of problems which have been encountered and continue to be encountered in the realisation of this scene.

The immediate problem facing those groups who wish to promote the growth of urban dance music in Newcastle is the distinct lack of an established network of *alternative clubs* in the city. Indeed, as will be examined in more detail later, this factor has in itself had a profound influence upon the nature of the urban dance music scene in Newcastle as certain groups of individuals have chosen to construct their own form of grass-roots scene organised around a number of informal venues away from the city centre. At the same time, however, other groups have attempted to overcome this problem by utilising the existing clubs in the city as a means of establishing a local urban dance music scene. This has generally involved urban dance music DJs or groups of enthusiasts approaching these clubs and seeking permission to stage events, which, if they can be proved to be moderately successful, have been allowed to continue. Consequently, a number of venues on the mainstream club circuit in Newcastle now offer 'specialist' nights on which particular urban dance music styles such as *house*, *garage* and *techno* are

featured. However, these tend to be once-weekly or even once-monthly events and are generally held on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday evenings as a means of generating extra income for the clubs. With the notable exception of one local venue, which, as I will demonstrate shortly has become something of a focus for urban dance music devotees, on Friday and Saturday evenings the majority of nightclubs in Newcastle revert to a more traditional nightclub atmosphere combining late-night drinking and dancing with a staple repertoire of contemporary chart and disco music.

Clearly then, the physical nature of Newcastle nightlife, its spaces and resources, together with the ways in these spaces and resources are characteristically used by the majority of local youth, is such that the scope which currently exists for the realisation of an urban dance music club scene in the city is, on the whole, fairly minimal. Thus, as a local techno fan explained to me:

*It's a very limited scene here. You get people from the outlying areas (of Newcastle) coming into the town on a Friday and Saturday as you always have ... I mean that's exactly what the Bigg Market's all about really isn't it? But away from the Bigg Market and the disco nightclubs, I'll call them 'cause that's what they are really, there's not much of a youth led movement really and certainly there's not much of an alternative scene ... it's difficult to get that kind of space. If you want a good techno night out, they're few and far between in Newcastle ... The dance scene is such a massive church, it's got so many different elements to it and many of those elements just don't seem to get much of an airing in Newcastle.*

Such sentiments were in turn echoed by a number of other interviewees. In each case, the dominant influence of the traditional pub and club culture in Newcastle was identified as the most singularly apparent reason for the failure of an alternative club scene to thrive in the city. This view was summed up neatly by one young male interviewee who offered the following observation: *"In this town any place that sells beer will be full. Newcastle has never felt the need to embrace the underground club culture"*. Significantly, however, this is an arrangement which appears to satisfy the local police who have, for the most part, taken a rather negative attitude to any type of club activity which attempts to break with the traditional nightclub pattern. During the course of my research in Newcastle, I interviewed the manager of a club which had been raided by the police on the pretence that the *house* music event taking place in the club on that particular

evening was a 'rave' and therefore a potential site for drug abuse. Although the raid failed to disclose any individuals in possession of drugs, at the same time it served to strengthen in the minds of regulars at the club that their scene was the subject of unfair victimisation on the part of the Newcastle police. Similarly, Holland's recent study of youth leisure patterns in Newcastle documents the police's systematic shutting down of "a supposedly drug dealing 'rave house' on the Quayside" (1995, p.48).

Despite such problems, however, a small urban dance music club scene is flourishing in Newcastle. Not surprisingly perhaps, in view of the resistance which continues to be encountered from the local police - a city centre club which featured techno on Friday evenings recently had its late licence revoked for periodically failing to close at 2.30am despite the fact that alcohol was not being sold after this time - this club scene and the types of DIY underground activity which are growing up around it have been variously described to me as "*very edgy*" and "*like fighting for your right to party*". Indeed, this collectively held sensibility that the Newcastle urban dance music scene is at the 'edge', that it occupies a precarious and threatened space bordered by an archaic, machoistic drinking culture on the one side and a coercive local policing strategy on the other, serves to create a particularly strong and distinctive form of neo-tribal bond between individuals who participate in urban dance music events in the city. Thus, as these individuals move between the various sites which comprise the Newcastle scene, although they will in some cases be only vaguely familiar to each other as people, they each have an intimate understanding of the collective use of these sites as spaces of defiance against what they commonly perceive to be negative or oppressive aspects of the local social environment.

Such an understanding is cemented into place via the forms of meaning and significance which are read off urban dance music itself. In discussing the significance of *indie* music,<sup>14</sup> Street has suggested that a central aspect of this music's appeal relates to the way in which its rhetoric of 'otherness' from the mainstream music industry in turn imbues its listeners with their own collective "sense of 'otherness'" from groups whose tastes and sensibilities are perceived to be more mainstream, safe or conformist (1993, p.50). A similar rhetoric could be

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<sup>14</sup> *Indie* or 'independent' music denotes a style of alternative guitar-based pop-rock. The term arose because bands playing this type of music during the mid to late 70s typically began their recording careers by signing to small independent record labels such as Stiff or Kitchen Records. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly common for such alternative guitar-based bands to sign directly to major labels while retaining the *indie* tag.

said to underlie the appeal of urban dance music. Moreover, in each case, such a rhetoric of otherness will align with the particular local circumstances within which urban dance music enthusiasts find themselves. With reference to one particular urban dance music club event in Newcastle, I want now to consider more extensively the distinctive rhetoric of otherness which the collective consumption of urban dance music communicates to local enthusiasts.

### **‘Pigbag’: Dancing in the ‘divided’ city**

‘Pigbag’, like many other urban dance music features in Newcastle is a once weekly event. This said, however, there are several factors which set ‘Pigbag’ apart from other urban dance music club events in the city. To begin with, ‘Pigbag’ takes place on a Saturday evening, a time when, as I have previously noted, club space in Newcastle is given over primarily to the city’s traditional weekend club clientele. Furthermore, as this scenario would suggest, the venue in which Pigbag is staged, The Waterfront, although a well known and established club, is at the same both musically and stylistically distinct from other clubs in Newcastle. Thus, while the majority of clubs in the city tend to view alternative forms of music merely as a means of generating extra profit on mid-week evenings, The Waterfront has traditionally had a strong commitment to the promotion of alternative music. Indeed, it is in this spirit that the club made the decision to feature urban dance music events. Thus, as the manager of The Waterfront explained to me:

*Our traditional market is indie music and live indie bands ...but the music scene’s changing ...I mean there’s the dance culture now, people of 18 have grown up with dance culture ...they haven’t grown up with live music culture ... So we’re looking more at clubnights now ...because that’s what young people want. Our house night on Saturday (Pigbag) is a good quality dance music night.*

The latter observation, regarding the quality of the Pigbag event, was strongly endorsed by those who attended it. In particular, there was a firm belief among the young people who I interviewed that the efforts of The Waterfront to hire in good quality DJs and the selected and specialist sounds which such DJs brought into the club were “*what the dance music scene is all about really*”. If a major aspect of urban dance music’s appeal is its deeply eclectic nature, then equally important is the skill of the DJ in taking such eclectic soundtracks and blending

them together in such a way that the music produced resonates with the mood of the audience. As one young woman put it: *"You can really tell the difference between the DJ who's checking how they're affecting the crowd and the DJ who's not really bothered and is just going through the motions ... Even when you just walk into a club, you can sometimes just tell whether a DJ's in touch with the crowd or not"*. Indeed, for many Pigbag regulars, it was this feature of the event which, more than any other, guaranteed its stamp of exclusivity thus setting it and those who frequented it apart from the urban dance music events which took place in the more mainstream clubs in Newcastle. This is clearly illustrated in the following account from another young female urban dance music devotee whose evaluation of Pigbag rests on her experience of attending mid-week urban dance music events in the city centre:

*There are similar events (to Pigbag) but there's nothing that gives you the sort of selection of musical styles within dance music. 'Kiss' does a sort of copy type of event, but they don't get the sort of DJs that you would expect if you were somebody who really liked house music and you were concerned about who was playing what records ... So it wouldn't be classed as the same 'cause they're the sort of DJs that nobody's really heard of. Then you've got places like 'Venus' where they do have better DJs but only a certain group of them ... they haven't got the sort of turnover in DJs and the things that you would expect from a proper house club that's bringing you the new changes in house music.*

In addition to the shared sense of exclusivity which the music featured at Pigbag conferred upon those who attended the event, a number of other collective sensibilities were also importantly mediated by the music. Most clearly, the music was seen to act as a form of barrier which was not easily penetrated by those who were not part of the dance music scene. The specialist nature of the music, it was argued, was such that its full appreciation demanded a form of total absorption on the part of the individual which did not apply to more conventional types of club setting where the music, although danced to, also invariably acted as a backdrop for other forms of social behaviour, notably, talking and drinking. The type of music featured at Pigbag ensured, therefore, that the event remained a protected space. To some extent this was also guaranteed by the physical location of the Waterfront club itself. Set some considerable distance away from the centre of Newcastle, the club's spatial isolation served to prevent intrusion from city-centre



clubbers or “townies”<sup>15</sup> as they were often referred to. However, given that a small number of clubbers from the city centre did on occasion visit Pigbag, the alternative and specialist musical environment which they encountered there combined with the Pigbag crowd’s failure to observe the more conventional traits of club behaviour associated with the club scene in the centre of Newcastle was deemed to exclude such individuals from participating in the event. Thus, as Joe, another Pigbag ‘regular’, explained to me:

*The people who come here do so because they specifically like the kind of music ... and the kind of atmosphere that comes with this kind of music. You don't get people going 'where shall we go tonight? Oh I know, lets go there (to Pigbag) and get pissed!' It's not that kind of a thing. It's a specialist night for people who are into this sort of thing. So you don't get many pissheads in. You see them occasionally, but they don't understand what it's all about so they don't generally come back again.*

Such *integral* processes of exclusion were also considered important because of the potential threat of violent and/or sexist behaviour which *outsiders* from the city centre club scene were deemed to present. Unwritten traditions of non-violent and non-sexist behaviour appear to be a central aspect of the urban dance music movement with the effect that urban dance music events are, on the whole, “typified by behaviour which is less aggressive, machoistic and violent than more conventional nightclubs” (Merchant and MacDonald: 1994, p.22). Indeed, this is a particularly appealing aspect of urban dance music events from the point of view of female enthusiasts in that they enjoy a total freedom from the forms of male harassment often experienced by women in more conventional nightclubs. Russell has suggested that central to the ethos of urban dance music is a total rejection of “the dated 70s notion of the disco as a meat market” (1993, p.98). Again, such unwritten traditions are argued by many urban dance music enthusiasts to relate closely to the music itself or rather to result from the type of mindset which one who is “*truly into the music*” acquires when dancing to it. Speaking about the non-sexist and non-violent atmosphere at Pigbag and other urban dance music events, a number of the young people I spoke to suggested that the “*happy*” sound of the music unequivocally communicates a similar feeling to its devotees. Thus,

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<sup>15</sup> The term *townie* would appear to be commonly used by followers of alternative styles of music as a way of setting themselves apart from those whose musical tastes/fashion sensibilities are more mainstream and who consequently frequent the more conventional bars and clubs - the latter generally being situated in city centres and thus making up the central or ‘town’ scene. For a further account of the townie - alternative division, see Beattie (1990, pp.44-48).

as one young male interviewee explained: *"You just can't imagine getting angry. The music really makes you happy ... you just want to dance about and jump up and down like a loony"*. Other interviewees, while maintaining the notion that such feelings bespeak a quality intrinsic to the music itself, at the same time suggested a more immediate link between the value placed by individuals upon this aspect of the urban dance music event and the opportunity which it presents to temporarily escape the oppressive atmosphere which they associate with Newcastle. According to these young people, however much urban dance music imparts its own form of 'feel good' sensibility upon those present at the Pigbag event, the individual's endorsement of this sensibility is accompanied by the deeper feeling that it in some way cuts against the grain of the aggressive *townie* sensibility deemed to hold sway in Newcastle and to dominate the leisure spaces made available to young people in the city, particularly on a Friday and Saturday night. This sentiment is clearly illustrated in the following discussion group extract:

Jason: *The point is right, you put up with this hassle all the time. You never know when you might be threatened with 'aggro' right. By the time the weekend comes around you've had enough of all that, you're ready for something else, you're ready to party.*

Pete: *Yeah, that's right. You wanna party in as silly a way as possible like.*

Jason: *So you just get down to Pigbag and that's it. Whoosh! ...and off you go. Everyone down there's the same, all giving it loads 'cause it's just a top laugh and that's what you need at the end of the week, a top laugh. It's pointless coming down unless you're up for that.*

For these young people then, the dance sensibility which they describe serves to consolidate the distance which they perceive to exist between themselves and city centre clubbers and also offers a further form of barrier against intrusions on the part of the latter. This collective belief is further enhanced by the notion that the type of dance engaged in at Pigbag is 'pure' dance and a form of total engagement with the music as opposed to the types of exhibitionist dancing which are deemed to characterise clubs in the city centre. DiMaggio has suggested that social dancing signifies "a means of constructing social relations (and knowing what relationships need to be constructed). It helps to establish networks of trusting relations that facilitate group mobilization" (1987, p.443). Similarly, Hanna argues that: "Dance may function like swearing - as a form of release. The non-verbal

mode ...is more powerful than the verbal for expressing such fundamental feelings in social relationships as liking, disliking, superiority, timidity, fear and so on." (1992, p.179). In the case of Pigbag, the type of social dancing engaged in would appear to form part of a closed communication system in which participants in the event articulate non-verbal statements to each other concerning their collective sense of ideological distance from the kinds of patriarchal and machoistic sensibilities around which the act of dancing in city centre clubs is believed to orientate.

Certainly my own observations of Pigbag and other urban dance music events in Newcastle would seem to add weight to this argument. Thus, while dancing at such events, is engaged in collectively, it is at the same time a distinctly individual activity. In contrast to more typical forms of nightclub where dancing takes place in a group or together with a partner, at urban dance music events the individual dances alone and is at liberty to move as he/she feels inspired to do by the music. Moreover, in further comparing urban dance music events with more mainstream types of clubnight, it is interesting to note how the normal spatial divisions between dancefloor and non-dancing areas merge together. Individuals routinely make use of any given space, including areas normally designated as seating areas, and thoroughfares such as flights of stairs connecting different floor levels or leading from the dance floor to the bar. Furthermore, given the fact that dancers appropriate spaces which other individuals may need to use, the latter, in crossing this space will make every effort to ensure that the dancer remains undisturbed and accidental bodily contact is normally followed by a brief expression of apology. That such modes of collective practice underpin a deeper political sensibility, via which participants in the local urban dance music scene demonstrate to each other their sense of 'otherness' from the types of sensibilities which hold sway in the city centre clubs, is further illustrated in the following account given to me by a group of female Pigbag regulars. Similarly, this account also re-emphasises the point raised earlier concerning the non-sexist atmosphere which prevails at urban dance music events and their consequent special appeal for female enthusiasts:

*Sandra: I remember when I first came out to Pigbag and sat there and just went 'ahh I've never seen anything like this before in mi' life'. The way people interact together ... it's so friendly and so open. I'd never been anywhere like that before, I'd only ever been to a normal nightclub where you're ...*

Jane: *Where you're worried about some guy coming up and saying 'all right luv!' (all laugh).*

Sandra: *And people are dancing exactly how they want to dance and not self consciously, you know. I really like that about it . . . you don't feel as if you're being watched by other people.*

Julie: *People aren't going there just to watch a person of the opposite sex and to go over and try and chat them up and stuff . . . it's not for that sort of reason that people come to Pigbag.*

Sandra: *And it's really lovely at the end of the night when the lights go on and people don't scuffle off into the corners and go and hide and try to fix their make up or whatever . . . people are still dancing to the very last second that the music's on you know.*

In the social context of Newcastle then, Pigbag serves a number of important functions. On a mundane level it offers a regular weekend space for groups of individuals to gather and collectively celebrate their enthusiasm for urban dance music. At a deeper level, I would argue, Pigbag allows local consumers of urban dance music to articulate a collective show of defiance against the types of *townie* clubber sensibilities which they associate with Newcastle city centre and against which they are collectively opposed. From the point of view of those who attend it, Pigbag offers a social space in which an alternative club culture to that which holds sway in the city centre can be temporally constructed. Moreover, because of the threat which local urban dance music devotees believe exists to their scene, the isolated location of the host venue for Pigbag, The Waterfront, together with the latter's own alternative roots, serves to emphasise the underground sensibility and locally articulated rhetoric of otherness around which this scene has come to be organised.

As I pointed out earlier, however, the local circumstances pertaining to the possibility of staging urban dance music events in Newcastle have led many enthusiasts to look beyond the limited opportunities offered by the local club scene and to establish a form of DIY urban dance music scene organised around a number of informal venues. In some respects these two scenes overlap. Certainly, many of those who attend Pigbag and other local club-based urban dance music events are also familiar with the informal scene. By the same token, however, the

informal dance music scene in Newcastle has a number of features which set it apart from the club-based scene. Moreover, this scene has its own particular story to tell concerning the local character of the city and the ways in which urban dance music is being used to challenge some of the latter's more oppressive features. I want now, therefore, to make a more detailed study of Newcastle's informal urban dance music scene and the local factors which have played a part in its foundation.

### **'Fighting for the right to party': DIY urban dance music events in Newcastle**

People routinely make space for informal practices ... informality permeates every aspect of the functioning of society. It is a vast realm - a multiplicity of niches - where human beings place themselves, either prior to the advent of an imposed formal system or within the nooks and crannies of the formal societal system. They do so in order to deal effectively with the routine issues of everyday life. Informality is understood here as a reality not totally separated from the formal system, but rather linked to it and shaped by it. Informality is a structure of action that contains both harmonious (adaptation) and contradictory (resistance) relationships. It is a site of power in relation to external disciplinary and control power (Laguerre: 1994, pp.42, 2).

In many ways, the informal urban dance music scene in Newcastle plays a more important role than that of the club-based scene. Certainly were it not for the occurrence of informal events, then the opportunities to consume urban dance music in the city would be markedly reduced. Whereas the club-based scene is restricted both spatially and temporally, informal urban dance music events operate without such restrictions, making use of a range of different sites and occurring in a relatively spontaneous fashion at times which extend beyond the opening hours of local clubs. During the course of my research I attended several such events and was informed of many others which were "*happening*" in Newcastle. The events which I attended took place in locations as diverse as a nurses' halls of residence building, a 'student house' in Fenham (a district in the west of Newcastle) and a flat in Elswick (again in west Newcastle) which was described to me as "*nobody's place in particular, just a 'giro-drop'*". The differing nature of each of these venues also serves as a telling indication of the wide ranging groups of individuals who participate in Newcastle's informal urban dance music scene and who, through their efforts to organise events, help to sustain it. This, in turn, re-emphasises the neo-tribal nature of urban dance music consumption. Commenting upon the range of people who attend informal dance music events and relating this

to one particular house party at which we had both been present, a local organiser offered the following observation: *"You always get a real mixture of people. For instance, at that party on Saturday night there were people ranging from a local councillor, to students, to local unemployed kids"*. The informal urban dance music scene in Newcastle then, comprises a distinctly diverse constellation of individuals whose only common focus of interest is an enthusiasm for urban dance music and their subscription to a particular form of localised sensibility which finds a collective voice through participation in informal urban dance music events.

As I have already pointed out, in many respects informal urban dance music events in Newcastle act as a means of compensating for the lack of an established alternative club scene in the city. However, embedded within the DIY sensibility of those groups who organise such events there exists the basis for a wider form of protest against the politics of the local state. Castells has suggested that individuals "tend to consider cities, space, and urban functions as the mainspring for their feelings" and goes on to argue that when such feelings develop into "an alternative global vision" individuals often "feel more comfortable if they define their alternative in a territory: they propose an alternative social organisation, an alternative space, an alternative city" (1983, pp.326-327). Thus, it could be argued that the informal dance music scene in Newcastle, rather than simply offering a range of musical choices which are not readily available in the city centre, symbolises a form of social critique in which the nature of local policy making regarding local club entertainment, particularly as this relates to club licensing laws, is not only brought sharply into question but also actively challenged. Indeed, speaking to individuals who participate in informal urban dance music events in Newcastle, they were often deeply critical of what they considered to be the conservative and dated policies under which nightclubs in the city were operated. Consequently, the informal dance music scene was to deemed to open up a space, or rather a series of spaces for the flexing of a type of *all-nighter* or *weekender* lifestyle sensibility recognised by these individuals as centrally significant to the urban dance music ethos but felt by them to be systematically denied in the city centre. Thus, as one young man explained:

*Clubs should have the same entertainment licensing as in Europe. It's starting to happen here a bit more now, in places like London, Leeds and Manchester. Clubs like 'Back To Basics' (in Manchester) go through till six in the morning ... but the clubs in Newcastle end at two thirty. That's an insult on your civil liberties, if I'm down in London I won't even go out until around twelve or twelve thirty.*

*That's why the party scene up here is so important. A lot of people view the house parties and stuff as sort of 'the club part two' ... they come out of the clubs still pent up and want to carry on so they go to a party. But then again there are a lot of people who aren't interested in the clubs up here, because of the way they operate ... so they just go to the parties.*

As the above account begins to illustrate, there exists among those individuals who facilitate and participate in the informal urban dance music scene in Newcastle a clear commitment to constructing a version of dance music culture which corresponds more closely with their perception of how this culture *should* be. This is based partly upon a reading of other national and international dance music scenes but also draws upon an intimate knowledge of the Newcastle club scene and the forms of local authority which dictate the nature of this scene. Indeed, viewed from this perspective, informal urban dance music events are particularly significant because of the sense of empowerment which they give to those who participate in them. Thus, if part of the appeal of the informal scene is that it acts to challenge the *status quo* of Newcastle's city centre club scene, then equally important is the type of 'hands on' opportunities which the facilitation of this informal scene offers to individuals. Those individuals who help to organise events do so in the knowledge that they are at the same time contributing to the physical realisation of the alternative sensibility to which they subscribe.

Such 'hands on' experience can take a number of forms. Most importantly, perhaps, the physical realisation of the informal dance music scene relies upon the fast and efficient transformation of chosen locations for events into credible venues. The centrality of this task to the viability of the informal scene cannot be overlooked. If informal events are to successfully operate in a counter-hegemonic fashion to the entertainment policies of official night clubs in Newcastle they must, in order to consolidate their alternative stance, be in a position to offer the 'informal' clubber a number of facilities which approximate those which one would normally find in an alternative nightclub. Such facilities include, for example, suitable decor, suitable lighting and other visual effects, an adequate sound system and a good range and quality of music. Additionally, many informal events will attempt to provide some form of facility for the provision of refreshments. Thus, as several interviewees pointed out to me, when "*done properly*" such informal events can generate the feel and excitement of a club atmosphere but without the restrictions imposed by local licensing regulations. Indeed, the commitment of those who organise informal events to providing an

atmosphere comparable with that which one might find in an alternative nightclub was obvious to me at many events which I attended. Thus, for example, at one particular event, held in a small three roomed flat, the sound system and a team of Afro-Caribbean DJs had been specially hired in for the occasion from Manchester. When I later asked one of the organisers why they had gone to such trouble he replied thus:

*Well, we wanted to put something very special on. Now, the type of stuff that was featured the other night is a new form of music that's coming through ... that's making it in Manchester, Birmingham, Bradford and the like, which is called Jungle. There isn't anyone up here in the North East that actually plays that type of music. So it was really with a view to the music that was on offer that we set this thing up. We wanted the type of music which that system provided. And if you ask me, I think that it was very well appreciated. Just a change, something a bit different. You couldn't have got that kind of a sound system from Newcastle and that's part of the appeal really.*

A second event which I attended boasted a similarly elaborate sound system, or rather a series of systems. Because of the location of the event, a three storey house, a number of different dance events were being staged simultaneously, each floor of the house featuring a different style of music from the next - this characteristic corresponding with the point I made earlier regarding the fragmented, neo-tribal nature of such events, individuals moving freely between different sites temporarily engaging with a multiplicity of crowds and musical moods. Moreover, all the windows of the house had been blacked out and large drapes hung from the walls of each room in order to create a more intimate atmosphere. Similarly, in keeping with what my interviewees had reported, all of these events could be classed as *all-nighters*. None of the informal dance music events which I attended ended before 6.00 a.m. and several carried on until around 10.00 a.m.. Still more elaborate examples of informal "*dos*" were described to me by enthusiasts who I met at or through attending such events. Thus, as one young man explained:

*I've been to one in, now where was it ... ah yeah in Jesmond. It was a three storey house and the first two floors were empty ... every room was covered in bin liners and black plastic ... they had TVs mounted on the walls all round the house showing nature videos and stuff ... and then they had other things such as flashing lights ... and they'd obviously hired in the sound system. Yeah, they*



*really go to some effort . . . so when it's a decent sized house, if it's a good event you'll end up with six hundred people or so crammed in there.*

As the above accounts begin to reveal, in much the same way that Pigbag is deemed to be an exclusive event by its devotees, so the informal dance music scene was also argued to be characterised by a form of exclusivity by those who facilitated the scene and participated in it. Again, the musical aspect of such events was felt by many to confirm their exclusive nature, hence the great effort invested in hiring in sound systems featuring forms of music which are, as yet, little heard in Newcastle clubs. By the same token, however, such informal events also offered an ideal facility for a more *home grown* form of musical exclusivity. Many individuals use the informal scene as a way of gaining experience of DJ work themselves. As one party DJ pointed out to me: *"It takes years of practice to get this sort of DJing right. A lot of kids start by doing a bit of mixing at home and then when they feel a bit more confident they come out to the parties. The party thing is a very good training ground for young mixers"*. Indeed, several skilled DJs who I spoke to also claimed to enjoy playing at the informal venues because of the chance which it gave them to try out new types of sound mixing on an audience before they took it into a club setting.

If DJs play a pivotal role in the production of urban dance music sounds, mixing different soundtracks together to create varying moods and rhythms, then equally important are the urban dance music producers who initially put together such soundtracks. As I pointed out earlier, the availability of relatively cheap high quality digital recording equipment has given rise to a proliferation of *bedroom* recording studios in which amateur producers are able to create professional quality music. I also suggested that while this situation does not threaten the position of the mainstream industry as such, what it does mean is that the latter no longer has a monopoly on the production of high quality music. Thus, as music making becomes increasingly de-centred a growing number of new sounds and styles in urban dance music are beginning to circulate independently of the mainstream industry via more informal channels. Some of these informal channels, notably small independent record shops, have the capacity to distribute the work of amateur producers over a wide area. Thus, several such shops in Newcastle have links with similar shops in other European countries and in the United States. However, as an employee from one of these shops explained to me, the amount of product which can be distributed via this network is relatively small. On average, he informed me, a record distributed in this way *"will probably*

sell globally around 2,000 copies". Consequently, for many amateur urban dance music producers, the remunerative incentive is often much less pronounced than a desire simply to have their music heard. As one amateur producer pointed out to me: *"This music will never be popular, it will never be mainstream but that's not the mission. The important thing is that people should have access to it"*. As such, a more viable outlet for the product of amateur producers are the various local urban dance music scenes. Indeed, it could be argued that in the context of informal dance music scenes such home-grown music also becomes an important symbol of exclusivity. When a particular style or variation of urban dance music becomes strongly associated with a particular informal scene then it in turn becomes an indelible aspect of that scene's character, informing a sensibility which also permeates the collective identity of those who participate in it. Thus, for example, in speaking about the informal *jungle* scene in Manchester an interviewee who was familiar with this scene explained: *"There's a real link between some of that music and the local people . . . some of the jungle sound is just about the people in that area . . . 'cause it's a different style of music compared to even just the next estate or whatever"*.

The above account illustrates succinctly that the appeal of *home-grown* urban dance music is precisely its home-grownness. The music itself becomes a distinct form of local sensibility, a way in which those who consume it both formulate and articulate collective statements about the place in which they live. Moreover, such grassroots uses of digital technology and the impact of home-recorded product upon the collective identity of local urban dance music scenes again suggests the need for important revisions to the existing literature on mass culture and mass cultural products. Thus, rather than serving to block or subvert the attempts of social actors to assert their own form of cultural identity, a contention which is traditionally held by mass cultural theorists, it is the products of the mass culture which are facilitating such modes of localised expression. In the case of DIY urban dance music scenes, the use of state of the art digital recording and sampling equipment in order to rework existing vinyl records into 'new' musical pieces plays an important role in both the establishment and preservation of a collective sense of identity and exclusivity.

In this chapter I have started to provide an empirical foundation for the subcultural critique and subsequent theoretical reconceptualisation of the relationship between youth, music and style presented in part one of this study. Using the example of urban dance music I have attempted to illustrate, in the first instance, the empirical

value of neo-tribalism as a basis for studying the various sensibilities of musical taste which inform contemporary youth. Subsequently, incorporating the second theme of this study, I have begun to consider the relationship which exists between the articulation of such sensibilities and the particularities of local experience. Using the example of Newcastle upon Tyne, I have endeavoured to show how the social context of this city has framed a series of sensibilities among urban dance music enthusiasts which have, in their turn, resulted in the construction of a highly localised urban dance music scene. In particular, I have been concerned to examine how such sensibilities serve to inform the negotiation and symbolic *marking out* of local spaces in which to stage urban dance music events in the face of a local power structure which remains unequivocally oppressive in its policies regarding the staging of such events. Clearly, it follows that if local knowledges are seen to play such a formative role in the collective uses of this particular musical genre, then they must also influence collective responses towards other genres. In the following chapter, which is again centred around research conducted in Newcastle, I want to examine the way in which local knowledges influence the responses of young Asians in the city towards bhangra. In recent years a number of theorists have suggested that bhangra has given rise to a new 'Asian' youth subculture in Britain, disenchanted young Asians drawing upon the music as a means of articulating their anger and frustrations regarding the problem of racism and racial exclusion in this country. In my study of bhangra in Newcastle I will endeavour to illustrate how the role played by local knowledges acutely problematises such an essentialist conceptualisation of bhangra's cultural significance in modern Britain.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Bhangra in Newcastle: Music, ethnic identity and the role of local knowledge**

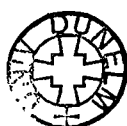
It is commonplace to think of ethnicity as a phenomenon that belongs to the cultural domain. By its very nature, ethnicity involves ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that constitute the essence of culture ... The problem is, however, that culture does not exist in a vacuum; nor is it fixed or unchanging. On the contrary, culture is in constant flux and is integrally part of a larger social process. The mandate for social inquiry, therefore, is that ethnic patterns should not be taken at face value, but must be related to the larger social matrix in which they are embedded (Steinberg: 1981, p.ix).

In chapter three I began to utilise the modified theoretical frameworks sketched out in part one of this study as the basis for an empirically centred investigation of the ways in which popular music forms and their attendant stylistic innovations are actively reworked by particular audiences to produce distinctive localised variations in national patterns of music based consumption, style and taste. In doing so I extended the critique of subcultural theory, begun in chapter one. At the same time, I also began to map the complex relationship between youth, popular music and locality. As I pointed out in chapter two, while some attention is now being given to the role played by local knowledges in determining the way in which popular cultural forms are received and utilised by particular groups and individuals, so far theorists have, on the whole, failed to realise the highly complex and heterogeneous nature of the social discourses and practices which combine to produce such forms of knowledge. This problem is complicated further in studies of music and ethnicity where there has been a tendency to theorise unproblematically the power of so called diaspora musics in acting as sources of unification and cultural expression for ethnic minority groups throughout the world<sup>1</sup> while leaving aside considerations of the particularised “geographical consequences of settlement and ‘race’ in sustaining cultures of Black politics in (differing) regions and cities” (Hesse: 1993, p.172).

During the course of this chapter, which focuses on the regional significance of bhangra music for Asian youth in Newcastle, I want re-assess some of the claims made by such work. In many respects, the type of cultural work performed by

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lipsitz (1994).



bhangra is considerably different from that accomplished by other forms of diaspora music such as rap and reggae. Thus, while it could be argued that rap and reggae's transition to the global pop scene has acted to loosen them from their immediate socio-political contexts and transformed them into broader platforms for social expression (an issue which will be explored more extensively in chapter five's study of rap and hip hop), bhangra remains firmly entrenched in the ontology of the Asian immigrant. This characteristic of bhangra has led to claims by a number of theorists that the music acts as a form of subcultural expression for Asian youth in Britain. As this chapter will attempt to illustrate, however, even if bhangra remains essentially 'Asian', the responses of young Asians to this musical form are so highly differentiated and crossed by local knowledges that it becomes inherently very difficult to reduce such responses to the level of an essentialist subcultural narrative. Indeed, even at the level of the local, a variety of conflicting and overlapping meanings become inscribed within the bhangra text.

I will begin my study of bhangra by charting its origins as a traditional Punjabi folk music and subsequent appropriation and development into a pop music form by Asian musicians living in Britain. I will then begin to focus upon bhangra in Newcastle, providing in the first instance some background information on Newcastle's Asian population before moving on to consider in depth the various local sensibilities which inform the consumption of bhangra in the city and the socio-cultural issues which these sensibilities address.

### **The origins and development of bhangra**

Bhangra originates from the Punjab provinces of India and Pakistan where it continues to retain its traditional significance as a form of folk music performed during the annual festival held to mark the completion of the sugar cane harvest. Bhangra is also used to celebrate the arrival of the new year in the Punjab (Banerji and Baumann: 1990, p.140). During the mid 1970s young Asians living in Britain began experimenting with bhangra music, retaining traditional bhangra instruments, most notably the *dholak*<sup>2</sup> and the *dholki*,<sup>3</sup> but also adding modern western instruments such as the electric guitar and bass, the keyboard synthesiser

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<sup>2</sup> The *dholak* is a large double headed drum beaten with sticks. During bhangra performances the *dholak* player carries the instrument on a shoulder strap which enables him to move around on the stage. The *dholak* is considered to be the central instrument in a bhangra band, and *dholak* player the leader of the traditional dance which often accompanies the performance of bhangra music.

<sup>3</sup> The *dholki* is a smaller version of the *dholak*, which is played by hand. Unlike the *dholak* player, the *dholki* player performs seated.

and the drum kit, thus infusing the rhythms and timbres of bhangra with the characteristic sounds and stylistic influences of western pop music. As noted above, the resulting bhangra-pop fusion is often represented by theorists as a 'subcultural' music via which Asian youth in Britain are able to articulate their own distinctive mode of cultural expression. Thus, for example, Banerji and Baumann, have suggested that bhangra-beat, as this new form of bhangra came to be known, "was exactly what (Asian youth) wanted. Young, fresh, lively and modern, it was as genuinely Indian as it was recognisably disco" (ibid., p.142). Arguably, however, this is too simplistic a view of bhangra-beat's appeal, not least of all because of its interpretation of the genre as a 'youth music'. Indeed, because of its traditional roots and the elements of traditional music which characterised its sound, the appeal of bhangra-beat was not infact restricted to young people but extended to a much wider audience. This is evidenced by the fact that bhangra-beat quickly became popular at Asian social functions such as weddings and Melas<sup>4</sup> where it continues to perform a distinctive role by uniting people of all ages in a celebration of traditional aspects of Asian life.

A more exclusively youthful variation of bhangra emerged during the late 80s and early 90s as a new generation of Asian musicians influenced by contemporary dance music further modified the bhangra sound producing new forms such as *fusion*, which incorporates elements of *house* and *techno*, and *ragga*, which blends bhangra with rap and reggae styles (Gilroy: 1993, p.82). In doing so they introduced bhangra into the mainstream club scene while certain artists such as ragga performer, Apache Indian and fusion acts Bally Sagoo, Fundamental and Detrimental are beginning to achieve commercial success and are regularly seen on MTV. Again, however, writing which has focussed upon these newer forms of bhangra has tended to create an oversimplistic and decidedly idealistic vision of the music's ability to act as a vehicle for Asians of differing religious and social backgrounds to overcome their own particular differences and forge a common form of 'subcultural' ethnic identity in order to symbolically counteract the marginalisation, exclusion and hostility to which they are often subject in Britain. Lipsitz, for example, has argued that: "Bhangra brings together Punjabis of many religions (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jain, and Christian) and from many countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh)" (1994, p.129). Similarly, a recent Sunday

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<sup>4</sup> A Mela is an Asian festival featuring music, dance and a range of side stalls at which food, literature and Asian clothes are sold. In Britain Melas are held annually each summer in many major cities and are usually free 'open air' events.

Times article suggested that “in Britain Bhangra has, in the course of the past 10 years, become the property of the whole Asian nation”.<sup>5</sup>

Such representations of the more recent bhangra styles, I would argue, also gloss over the true complexity of the relationship which exists between the music and its audience. Again this is due to the failure of such work to properly conceptualise bhangra’s simultaneous engagement with pop and folk discourses. Thus, if bhangra is seen to facilitate the staging of a series of unified cross-cultural responses to urban issues, such as racism, racial discrimination and forms of racial exclusion, then it at the same time exposes the conflicts and contradictions which are inherent in such a project, conflicts and contradictions which result from the audience’s differentiated uses of the folk and pop elements contained within modern bhangra music to articulate a variety of positions relating to the question of ethnic identity.

Indeed, as I will go on to consider in more detail presently, the cultural work performed by bhangra can in many ways serve to highlight rather than reduce the social and religious divisions existing between Asians in Britain. Similarly, the various forms of identity which can be articulated through bhangra will in each instance be underscored by issues of locality, that is to say, they will address issues of ethnicity as these are experienced locally. This again acutely problematises the argument that bhangra speaks a common language to those who consume it. I want now to make a more detailed study of such locally situated uses of bhangra, and their implications for the sociological interpretation of the genre, by considering the various forms of significance which bhangra assumes for the Asian population of Newcastle.

### **Bhangra in Newcastle: Setting the scene**

In comparison to many other British cities, such as Bradford, Birmingham and London, the Asian population in Newcastle is relatively small. According to the results of the 1991 census, 2.3% of the city’s inhabitants are ethnic Pakistani or Indian while 0.5% are ethnic Bangladeshi (Hollands: 1995, p.26). Newcastle’s Asian population is concentrated in the west of the city, largely, although not exclusively in the neighbouring wards of Fenham and Elswick. In many respects this area represents a self-contained if not ghettoised world for the Asian

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the article “Some Like it Kool” by Andrew Smith, featured in the Sunday Times, July 10th 1994.

population of Newcastle. In addition to the temples, mosque and community centre, there are Asian butcher's shops, clothes shops, a general store and video rental shops which specialise in Asian films. This socio-spatial segregation of Newcastle's Asian population in turn has a strong influence upon the leisure opportunities available to young Asians in the city. A recent study by Hollands has drawn attention to the issue of leisure provision for the younger members of ethnic minority groups in Newcastle and begun to question the extent of the city's accessibility to these groups, particularly in terms of nightlife opportunities (*ibid.*, pp. 26-27). The results of my own research indicate that very little evening leisure provision is currently made for young ethnic minority groups in Newcastle. Certainly, with respect to young Asians, there are no regular weekly events or club nights which are designed to cater for their particular musical tastes.

It is, therefore, clearly very difficult to speak in terms of a bhangra 'scene' in Newcastle as the opportunities which exist to consume bhangra are few and far between. Indeed, for reasons which will presently become clear, this situation has been exacerbated in recent months. Similarly, again because of the small concentration of Asians in Newcastle, there is very little production of bhangra music in the city. At the time of writing there are no bhangra bands in Newcastle and only two bhangra DJs. In addition to determining channels of access to the music itself, there is a clear sense in which the local arrangements governing the lives of young Asians in Newcastle serve to actively shape their individual and collective responses to bhangra and those events at which it is featured. During the course of my research it has been possible to identify a number of common responses and sensibilities among Asian youth in Newcastle regarding the consumption of bhangra music which can in turn be linked with attitudes and values derived from the local discourses which shape their daily lives. Thus, while some young Asians regard bhangra as one of the few opportunities which they have to celebrate their cultural heritage in a city where over 95% of the population is white, others use it as a frame of reference via which to articulate their sense of distance from aspects of Asian culture, a distance which is sustained through a rejection of bhangra in favour of what they term 'English music'. A further group of interviewees stated that bhangra acquired significance for them only when consumed in the context of a bhangra gig or at other social events where bhangra is performed such as weddings or Melas. Additionally, bhangra provides an important form of sociality for those young Asians who, for a variety of reasons, have become marginalised from the wider Asian population in Newcastle.



At a somewhat different and rather more pathological level, bhangra gigs in Newcastle also function to affirm the divisions and conflicts existing within Newcastle's Asian population, such divisions and conflicts arising from the differing cultural and religious interests of those groups of Asians living in the city and the power relationships which are consequently formed. Violence between Asian youths of different cultural and religious backgrounds has been a recurring problem at bhangra events in Newcastle with the result that the two major bhangra promoters in the region have now been banned from staging such events in all of the city's major nightclubs. There have been no bhangra gigs in Newcastle clubs during recent months and none are planned for the near future. Aligned with the problem of racial tension within the Asian population itself is the racial abuse to which Asians are subjected by white residents, particularly in those areas of the city in which Asian families are most heavily concentrated. The consequent frustration among young Asians is also believed to have resulted in violent outbursts at bhangra gigs. Partly in response to the problem of racism and associated problems of racial exclusion, a number of young Asians in Newcastle are now attempting to construct their own articulation of bhangra's value as a medium for racial unity via a radio programme entitled the 'Bhangra Bandits' which is broadcast weekly on Kool FM, a local community radio station. Significantly, the programme is intended not only for Asian and other ethnic minority groups living in Newcastle, but also aims to attract the attention of the city's white youth who have, as yet, been given little opportunity to listen to bhangra music.

Having outlined the various issues which serve to inform those ways in which bhangra is used as a local resource by young Asians in Newcastle, I want now to make more detailed study of each of these issues in turn. I will begin by considering bhangra's significance among certain groups of young Asian people as a way remaining in touch with the customs and practices of traditional Asian life. It should perhaps be pointed out that many of the interviews and discussions which are presented in the following pages were conducted before the current ban on bhangra events being held in Newcastle nightclubs was imposed.

### ***Bhangra as a celebration of tradition***

As I have already pointed out above, there is a tendency in the existing literature on bhangra to apply a rather general and oversimplistic interpretation of the music's social significance in which its perceived 'subcultural' qualities are

emphasised. Thus, for example, Gilroy, who has written extensively on issues of race and ethnicity, has argued that the main significance of bhangra relates to the way in which it acts as a medium for Asian youth to effectively “(reinvent) their own ethnicity” in a way which overcomes the cultural and religious boundaries existing between them and which is subsequently articulated in a collective show of defiance against the various racisms and oppressions which they experience in Britain (Gilroy: 1993, p.82). While Gilroy’s work is in other respects acutely sensitive to what he terms “the consonance of social and physical space” his observations on bhangra appear to wholly ignore this relationship (1987, p.230). Thus, Gilroy’s interpretation of bhangra’s cultural significance presupposes both a ready accessibility to and uniform usage of the music by all of its consumers irrespective of governing local conditions. However, as my work in Newcastle serves to illustrate, such a position cannot be unproblematically assumed when attempting to theoretically situate the cultural work performed by bhangra. In every instance such cultural work will be mediated by and thus serve to highlight conditions and characteristics particular to a given locality and the sensibilities of that locality’s inhabitants. Furthermore, given that an aspect of bhangra’s appeal does indeed relate to its facilitation in the reformulating and rearticulation of ethnicity, such processes cannot be expected to occur in the uniform fashion suggested by Gilroy. Back has suggested that the notion of ethnic identity, as with other forms of social identity, can no longer be regarded as “‘real’ or ‘essential’” but rather needs to be seen as a “multi-faceted phenomenon which may vary through time and place” (1993, p.218). It follows then, that the ‘reinvention’ of ethnicity will also be a locally staged and highly subjective project.

Indeed, interviews and discussions with some young Asians in Newcastle have led me to the conclusion that, if anything, their ‘reinvention’ of ethnicity, as this is achieved through the consumption of bhangra, harks back to and celebrates the traditional forms of Asian life associated with their parent cultures rather than rejecting the latter and joining with other young Asians from other cultural and religious backgrounds in a form of subcultural expression. Such a response is clearly linked to the particular nature of bhangra events in Newcastle. As I have noted above, there exist in Newcastle limited opportunities to collectively consume bhangra. Significantly, a notable feature of many of my interviews and discussions with young Asians in Newcastle was the distinction which they tended to make between Newcastle and cities with larger Asian populations such as Birmingham and London. In these cities, it was argued, bhangra was part of a “*daily life practice*” for Asians. Nesrein, a 20 year old Muslim woman offered the following

account: *"In Newcastle you get maybe half a dozen (bhangra gigs) a year if you're lucky and that's pushing it ... but down south in Birmingham or London it's like every weekend you could go to one ... and you're still like missing most of 'em".* Moreover, if bhangra was deemed to be a more central aspect of daily life for Asian populations in these cities then such centrality was in turn deemed to be consolidated by the responsiveness of local bhangra musicians and DJs to the various taste cultures which have positioned themselves around the differing styles now identified with the term 'bhangra'. Khalid, a Pakistani Muslim, described the situation thus: *"There's a lot more Asians (in Birmingham) it's like a little India come Pakistan there ... and there's a lot more variety in bhangra as well. There's like traditional bhangra music, so you get a lot of the older generation going for that kind of stuff and then you've got your mainstream which the young ones go for."*

In contrast, bhangra events in Newcastle tend to feature only one type of bhangra, the style known as bhangra-beat, which, as I have previously pointed out, has the widest ranging appeal among the modern bhangra forms. The scarcity of bhangra events in Newcastle, combined with the style of music featured, has a profound influence on the nature of such events. Thus, as a local Asian radio presenter explained to me, a bhangra event in Newcastle is *"a cause for a family outing. You'll sometimes see whole family groups with the grandparents as well at bhangras"*. The nature of these events also ensures that those who participate forge a certain form of attachment to them, an attachment which is reinforced by the cultural significance which is collectively read off the music. Thus, if bhangra-beat combines elements of folk and pop, then in the context of Newcastle, the music is interpreted strongly in terms of the former, that is, in terms of its symbolising particular representations of culture and tradition. The net result of this is that bhangra becomes a celebration of traditional life, a sensibility which also extends to the younger Asians present at such events. This is clearly illustrated in the two interview extracts below in which young Asians from Newcastle discuss the style of dress worn at bhangra gigs. The first extract is taken from an interview with a young Muslim man and the second from a mixed discussion group of which all the participants were in their late teens and early twenties:

#### Extract One

A.B.: *How do people dress to go to a bhangra gig?*

*Junad: Normally . . . just jeans and stuff. Well, some people get dressed up very flashy but I suppose that's because bhangra is more special to them.*

### Extract Two

*A.B.: How do people dress to go to a bhangra gig?*

*Sara: It depends really . . . something that's comfortable because you're dancing . . . just something smart I'd say.*

*Shaziya: I mean the girls wear Indian dresses don't they.*

*Sara: Yes that's true, you don't get many girls going in western outfits.*

*Hardeep: But then again, going down south it's totally different.*

*A.B.: So why do girls up here tend to dress more traditionally?*

*Shaziya: Because it's a night out, a social event really.*

*Sara: Personally, I wouldn't feel comfortable if I went to an Asian do and I was dressed in a western way. So I prefer to wear like Asian clothes . . . It's like, I'm going to an Asian do so I want to dress properly.*

*Shaziya: I do too because it's like the only chance I get to wear eastern clothes . . . Where I live there's like eleven people who are Asian . . . my mum will go into town with her Indian clothes on but I wouldn't dare . . . but then if you go to Birmingham or something people just dress how they want and it just doesn't matter.*

Such accounts clearly contradict the views expressed by Gilroy and other theorists considered here regarding bhangra's 'subcultural' properties. From the point of view of the young people quoted in the above interview extracts, bhangra is significant not because of its resonance with a form of nationally staged subcultural movement, in which issues of individual culture and religion are rejected and a common cultural voice expressed, but because of the way in which the music connects with a locally experienced need to feel 'Asian' in the most traditional sense; a need which in turn demands that these young people look back to the

traditional roots of their respective cultural backgrounds. For these young people, bhangra music and those occasions at which it is featured assume a celebratory quality in that they signify a traditional event and provide an opportunity to temporarily articulate a form of ethnic identity which, it is felt, cannot be readily engaged in on a day to day basis. In this particular instance, bhangra is felt to permit such articulations of tradition by allowing the young interviewees to dress in certain ways, the wearing of the traditional Asian clothes of their parent cultures being blocked at other times by the predominantly white nature of the local environment.

While an important marker in such celebrations, however, style of dress is by no mean the only way in which young Asians in Newcastle signify this form of attachment to bhangra. Indeed, as the second of the above interview extracts implies, style of dress is, on the whole, very much a gendered issue among young Asians. Young men, I was informed, tend to wear traditional dress only at formal events such as weddings. Thus, for young Asian men, visual statements concerning bhangra's significance as a celebration of tradition were expressed in other ways, most notably through style of dance. At each bhangra gig which I attended it was common to see groups of young men in front of the stage dancing in, what was described to me, as a traditional bhangra style in which the arms are outstretched, pointing upwards and slightly bent at the elbows, while the shoulders are moved up and down in a fast 'shuffling' motion. As one young man explained:

*It's good to go to a bhangra gig because ... it brings back memories ... it's like tradition. It's the same with the dancing like. There is a traditional dance ... nowadays some people just move how they want to. But I think it (the traditional bhangra dance) does matter in some ways, 'cause it gives you a buzz to be doing something a bit traditional.*

Again, however, if such discussions of tradition may on the surface appear to negate the cultural and religious differences, drawing young Asian men together into a form of 'imagined' tradition - which would fit neatly with the subcultural interpretation of bhangra - then, as I will shortly go on to demonstrate, in Newcastle such cultural and religious divisions remained very much in place and were a source of constant antagonism between young Asian men at bhangra gigs. A similar point can be made concerning the images of, and references to, the Punjab which characterise modern bhangra performances. In August 1995

Achanak appeared at the Newcastle Mela held in Exhibition Park. This was the first time that a bhangra band had appeared in the city for many months and Achanak's performance served to confirm the celebratory quality which many Asians in Newcastle associate with a bhangra event. The size of the audience inside the concert marquee indicated that this was the main feature of the day. Moreover, while the bulk of the audience were young men and women in their early twenties, there were also a number of older people present as well as family groups with babies and small children.

An overarching theme of tradition was a constant feature of the event. Customary exchanges and humorous asides were spoken in Punjabi. Furthermore, while familiar *popspeak* expressions such as *"we're gonna rock tonight"* and snatches of popular chart songs such as Michael Jackson's 'Black or White' served to highlight the western influences in their music, all of Achanak's songs were performed in Punjabi and some of the songs drew upon aspects of Punjabi folklore and myth. Similarly, at one point in the show Achanak's vocalist asked the audience, *"well here we are in Newcastle, but can you tell me please, is there anyone here from the Punjab?"*, a question which resulted in a unanimous show of hands and shouts of approval from the audience. The point remains, however, that in the context of such performances, the cultural significance of the Punjab becomes deeply fragmented. Modern bhangra is considerably removed from its Punjabi roots with the effect that, if references by modern bhangra groups to the Punjab serve to stress the celebratory nature of the bhangra event - momentarily acting as a cultural beacon for the audience - then they also emphasise the highly contrived nature of such associations, bhangra now speaking to a variety of displaced Asian minority groups, Punjabi and non-Punjabi alike. Again, I will go on to discuss this aspect of modern bhangra and the problems which it presents for subcultural interpretations of bhangra's social significance in more detail later.

Interestingly, for some of the young Asians in Newcastle who I interviewed the celebratory aspect of bhangra appeared to be more important than the music itself. Thus, while they initially identified very strongly with bhangra, further discussion revealed that this was in fact a limited form of identification in as much as it related only to the music's role in the celebration of tradition. Bhangra, it was suggested, was *"good music"* for *"certain occasions"*. This view was elaborated on by a young female interviewee who explained: *"(Bhangra) is really suited to events where there's dancing ... and celebratory events like the Mela. On occasions like that it's great. At other times I don't listen to it, I listen to chart music and stuff like Prince. I*

*don't really like bhangra that much at other times*". Such accounts are consistent with the notion already explored in previous chapters of the individual in late modern society moving between different sites of collective expression and reconstructing lifestyle orientations such as articulations of identity and musical taste accordingly. Thus, in this particular instance, bhangra is acknowledged as an important aspect of the celebration of traditional Asian identity along with other cultural images and resources such as traditional dancing and style of dress. As such, the music's appeal becomes fixed within the context of those occasions on which this identity is celebrated. At other times the musical preferences, style of dress and other indicators of these young people's identities orientate more closely around the western styles and influences with which they daily engage. Indeed, this positioning of bhangra as merely one of a number of malleable lifestyle resources for use in the construction and articulation of identity also facilitates a rather different use of the music.

#### **The rejection of bhangra: A celebration of 'otherness'**

If certain groups of Asian youth in Newcastle considered bhangra as a valuable and necessary link with aspects of their cultural traditions then others, through their rejection of the music, used it as a means of articulating their separateness from these same traditions. Again there is a clear link between the sensibilities which inform this use of bhangra and the everyday experiences of Asian youth in Newcastle. Thus, while Newcastle's predominantly white ethnic-English environment imposes processes of exclusion upon Asians and other ethnic minority groups (which will be considered in more depth later) at the same time it communicates to them a series of lifestyle sensibilities beyond those encountered in the immediate environment of the family home. Clearly, such a situation is not specific to Newcastle as such sensibilities can and do influence ethnic minority groups in all regions, including those with larger and more established ethnic minority populations. Thus, as Bhachu argues in her study of young Sikh women in Britain:

Sikh women internalise styles, speech, and consumption patterns that are dominant in the localities in which they are situated ... Thus, Sikh women in Birmingham are highly 'Brummite' in their expenditure choices and in the construction of their identities, just as London Asian women in Camden are Camdenian in their modes of operation, in their interpretation of their wealth,

their clothes, the symbols important to the definition of their identities and styles (1991, p.408).

It could, nevertheless, be argued that appropriations by young Asians of such regional traits are in themselves locally determined processes. Thus, in those cities with a larger concentration of ethnic minority groups, appropriations by the latter of local sensibilities such as style of speech, mannerisms and even modes of dress may not in every case be understood, nor justifiably interpreted, as the appropriation of local 'white' traits. Rather, such local sensibilities will themselves reflect the multi-ethnic character of the locality. Indeed, within such an environment, it may be possible to effect forms of alternative ethnic identity which are neither consistent with the traditional parent culture nor indeed with the local white population. This was clearly illustrated by the Bradford riots of June 1995 which followed the police's alleged victimisation of two Asian women suspected of prostitution. In an article which appeared in the *Independent* shortly afterwards, it was suggested that this collective action by youths from Bradford's predominantly Muslim Asian population served to expose, among other things, a young people "adrift from the values of their elders ... attuned to the manners of contemporary Britain (but at the same time) immersed in ... a DIY Islam, an Islam of slogans rather than of substance ... fed by the Islamophobia" encountered in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

Such forms of DIY ethnicity are in themselves a form of lifestyle experimentation in which traditional and local sensibilities are combined to produce alternative forms of identity. Moreover, such articulations of identity are in clear contrast to those of the Newcastle Asian youth noted above whose rejection of Asian life as this is experienced in the family home is not realised via a turn to a radicalised Islam or some other religious doctrine but rather hinges upon the wholesale appropriation of the 'image' contrived by local white youth, itself a derivation of the *baggy* style fashionable during the early 90s and which involves the wearing of loose fitting jeans or trousers, designer training shoes and baggy checked shirts. Indeed, given that sections of Asian youth in Newcastle did wish to follow the example of their counterparts in Bradford, the effecting of such a radicalised Islamic sensibility would prove extremely difficult in a city with such a small Asian population and where white hostility to such a movement would be heavily pronounced.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the article "What went wrong in Bradford" by Ross Parry, featured in the *Independent*, June 13th 1995.



The opportunities to construct alternative notions of ethnic identity via articulations of musical taste are also crucially governed by the nature of the local environment. Yadwinder, a 19 year old Sikh who moved to Newcastle several years ago from the midlands, where he regularly returns to visit friends, gave the following account of the type of musically generated ethnic identity which he encounters in Birmingham:

*... down there you get schools where it's all Asians and Afro-Caribbeans and they've grown up together and that's the way they've been brought up to feel. The Asians listen to reggae and rap and stuff, and they'll have black people singing on their bhangra tracks ... the Afro-Caribbeans down there, they listen to bhangra music as well. It's a close knit sort of thing, they kind of like alienate themselves from the English music.*

It is interesting to note the way in which the term 'English music' is being used in this context to describe types of music other than diaspora forms such as reggae, rap and bhangra, the latter being used, according to the interviewee, by Asian and Afro-Caribbean ethnic minorities in the midlands region to demarcate a form of collective black identity. This definition of 'English music' is in sharp contrast to that employed by Asian youth in Newcastle, particularly in the case of those who claim to have no interest in bhangra. The following extract is taken from a group discussion conducted at a comprehensive school in west Newcastle:

Sunil: *None of us likes bhangra really.*

A.B.: *What sort of music do you like?*

Sunil: *English music.*

A.B.: *Such as?*

Sunil: *Rap.*

Abdul Khan: *I like rap and reggae.*

Bobby: *I like rap as well.*

A.B.: *So what is it about bhangra that you don't like?*

Bobby: *It's too old fashioned.*

Abdul Khan: *Yeah, I think so too ... It's like bhangra doesn't really fit in with my other musical tastes.*

A.B.: *Why is that, do you think?*

Abdul Khan: *Because of the lyrics really. I mean, I can understand bhangra lyrics but it just doesn't sound as good for me.*

Such differences in the definition and application of the term 'English music' relate back to and must be understood within the wider context of the relationship which exists between locality, identity and the politics of musical taste. Thus, in areas such as the midlands the higher concentration of Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian ethnic minority groups means that musics such as rap, reggae and bhangra can be used more readily to articulate alternative notions of the *black* identity into which young people of Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian descent include themselves. In Newcastle, however, the predominately white population means that such articulations are much more difficult to construct.

At the same time, however, the white environment of the city transmits a rather different sort of information to the younger members of ethnic minority groups about how youthful identities are to be constructed. Indeed, from the point of view of the youth of ethnic minorities, the adoption of the white youth lifestyle in a predominately white city can be a form of political statement in itself. This is particularly so in the case of the young Asian whose appropriation of the styles and tastes of the local white youth will often serve as a powerful indication to his/her family and peers of that individual's desire to rebel against or break away from the traditional Asian way of life. This begins to explain the participants' description, in the above extract, of rap and reggae as 'English' rather than black music.

That rap and reggae can be so readily described as 'English' relates back to the point which I made at the beginning of this chapter about the way in which these musics, via their transformation into global popular forms, have become loosened from their original political contexts and now speak for a multiplicity of culturally diverse sensibilities. Thus, if rap and reggae maintain for certain groups a black counter-cultural significance then at the same time they are known by others as highly popular mainstream styles. Arguably, in the case of Asian youth in

Newcastle, it is as the latter, that is as highly revered forms of mainstream popular music, that rap and reggae are chiefly recognised and consumed, this perception of the respective musics adhering most closely with that of white youth in the city.<sup>7</sup> Bhangra, on the other hand, because of its failure to enter the mainstream, becomes consonant with the image of traditional Asian life and is thus rejected by those young people who wish to set themselves apart from the latter. This view is clearly supported by the following comments from a youth worker who had tried unsuccessfully to start up a bhangra workshop at a community music resource centre recently opened in the Scotswood district of west Newcastle. Thus, as the youth worker put it: *"Most of the young Asian kids that I talk to aren't into bhangra at all. They seem to view it as an old man's music and the kind of stuff that they're into seems to be fusion music like rap or dub reggae"*. Indeed, the way in which many members of the older generation of Asians in Newcastle seem to embrace bhangra music as a channel through which aspects of Asian tradition can be preserved appear, in turn, to strengthen the resolution of certain groups of young Asians to adopt the musical tastes and attendant sensibilities of their white peers. As one young Asian man who I spoke to at a youth club in Elswick pointed out:

*Because it (bhanga) was a traditional music, it had better acceptance among parents. When people started adapting bhangra that got acceptance too. Kids are encouraged to listen to bhangra ... It's like when an Asian kid takes up cricket instead of football y'know. It's just seen as the right thing to do. The fear of parents is that their kids will slip away ... they're either going to become a nice young polite boy or girl or a football hooligan y'know. But when you ask kids yourself what kind of music they like bhangra never comes up ... a lot of 'em will tell you that they like chart music.*

This observation is in turn supported by the following account in which a young Sikh man explains how, in his opinion, his dislike of bhangra and preference for western popular music styles are rooted in the deep associations which bhangra holds for him with the traditions and customs of his home background:

*I was brought up listening to bhangra, because that's what my parents listened to ... there was nothing else to listen to really. Then, as soon as I got to about*

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<sup>7</sup> This said, however, as I will go on to consider in chapter five, there does in fact exist in Newcastle a small number of white rap enthusiasts whose aesthetic investment in the music hinges upon their belief in the resonance of its Afro-American roots with the ontology of the white working class youth. Significantly, however, this reading of the music is in part sustained by the perceived failure of other white youth groups in the city to grasp the deeper meaning of rap and hip hop.

*thirteen or fourteen ... I had different friends, white friends, and a different kind of atmosphere. I started listening to their tapes and I'd find out what I really liked which is dance music ... Now I can't stand bhangra.*

Significantly, in each of the above extracts there are further indications of the problems inherent in conventional studies of culture, or rather the pessimistic view taken by the latter towards the effects of cultural innovation and massification upon traditional forms of cultural life. Indeed, it is clear that rather than serving to decimate treasured vestiges of tradition, from the point of view of these young interviewees popular cultural resources offer important and effective ways of escaping from traditional life and the forms of oppression which it imposes upon them. As I will go on to consider later, my study of bhangra in Newcastle provided further instances of the ways in which mass cultural resources and technologies can be used by young Asians to an emancipatory effect when faced with the oppressions of more traditional forms of life.

If bhangra music, or rather the rejection of it coupled with a preference for western popular music forms, was used by some young Asians in Newcastle to effect a distance between themselves and aspects of traditional Asian life, then for others bhangra was deemed important precisely because it offered one of the few possibilities open to them to overcome this distance. Again, there is a strong link between this function of bhangra and its continuing role as a form of folk music which draws upon and simultaneously promotes particular versions of Asian identity. A comparable situation in this instance would be the performing of traditional Irish folk music in pubs and clubs established by groups of Irish emigrants around the world. In this context the music itself, that is to say, its lyrical references to aspects of the people and culture of Ireland and its sonic stimulation of collective memories of Ireland, is centrally important to the spirit of the occasion. Thus, as MacKinnon argues: "Traditional music ... serve(s) as a repository not just of historical 'facts' but of collective experience" (1993, p.68). Equally important, however, are the extra-musical qualities of these events, the opportunities for sociality framed within the collective sharing of a common and perhaps romanticised notion of cultural identity which the music facilitates. For those who have, due to a variety of reasons, become marginalised from more traditional forms of Asian life in Britain, bhangra could be argued to perform a similar function.

### **‘Bridging the gap’: Bhangra’s significance for those on the margins of Asian life**

While for some young Asians the rejection of traditional Asian life was maintained only at a limited level, for example among peers or as an occasional form of defiance in the home environment, for others this rejection was more openly articulated, often resulting in them leaving or being forced to leave home and, in more extreme cases, being rejected by their families. The underlying causes for such rejections of traditional life are manifold. In discussing this issue in connection with Newcastle’s Asian population an Asian community worker suggested several reasons why young people might become marginalised in this way:

*A lot of the kids have taken on a lot of western traits and they’ll often move out because they don’t want the pressure that’s put on them at home. Another factor is the growing incidence of cross-cultural relationships. For, example, a lot of Sikh young men have taken Pakistani girlfriends. But because of the devoutness of some communities, they’re then given the decision, ‘if you want a girlfriend or boyfriend move out!’ So that’s what they do.*

This in turn, however, raises new problems for such young people, for although they may disagree with certain aspects of those customs and traditions with which they have been raised, by the same token these remain important markers of identity for many young Asians. Again this has a particular bearing on the Asian population in Newcastle, the majority of whom are Muslim. As I have already illustrated above with reference to the recent Bradford riots, even those Muslims who reject certain aspects of the Muslim faith often remain particularly adamant in their support for Islam. Thus, for young Muslims who have become marginalised from the wider Muslim population because of their adoption of westernised traits, Asian gatherings such as bhangra events provide a crucial means of remaining in touch with their roots. To this end the elements of traditional bhangra incorporated into the modern bhangra sound serve to underline the music’s continuing associations with traditional Asian life. This, in turn, mediates an important sense of belonging to those who have become alienated from the wider Asian population. As with the example of the significance of traditional Irish folk music for Irish emigrants noted above, however, it is not simply the musical aspects of bhangra events which are deemed important but also their extra-musical qualities and characteristics. Indeed, conversations with young Muslims revealed

that in some cases bhangra gigs were attended not because of any aesthetic interest in the music itself but rather because of the opportunity for sociality which accompanied the performance and consumption of bhangra; the opportunity which the gathering gave them to see friends and family members who had not turned against them and thus preserve their sense of association with the Muslim community. Clearly, this use of bhangra was not restricted to Muslims but also provided a vital link for other Asians who had broken away from the wider Asian population. Thus, as one young Sikh man candidly reported: *"Bhangra, I can't listen to it ... it doesn't appeal to me. It's the going out bit I like, the chance to see my Asian mates. Sometimes I just go for the girls like"*.

Again, there is a clear indication in the above account that bhangra, rather than assuming a form of fixed subcultural symbolism for young Asians in Britain, has become integrated into a number of highly differentiated lifestyle strategies. Within each of these strategies the form of response to the music itself is greatly varied. Moreover, as this chapter serves to illustrate, even at the level of the local, there occurs such a multiplicity of lifestyle strategies that any attempt to apply a uniform discourse to the social significance of bhangra is inherently problematic. I will shortly demonstrate a further sense in which the localised responses to bhangra in Newcastle serve to problematise conventional subcultural interpretations.

Thus far I have been concerned to demonstrate how the local acts to inform a variety of ideas about the relationship between the consumption of bhangra and notions of traditional ethnic identity for certain young Asians in Newcastle. Conversely, I have also considered how a preference for western forms of popular music combined with an acquired belief in bhangra's association with the fixity of traditional Asian life can be used as a means of demonstrating one's sense of 'otherness' from aspects of Asian tradition. Similarly, I have endeavoured to show how, for those young Asians who have become marginalised from the wider Asian population in Newcastle, bhangra provides one of the few available means via which they are able to maintain their sense of association with their respective traditional ethnic identities. It follows, however, that if musical texts are subject to such multiple interpretations, particularly when these interpretations relate, as in the case of bhangra, to notions of ethnic identity, then forms of conflict may ensue as different groups exercise the respective sensibilities which they attach to the music. Moreover, just as these sensibilities are rooted in local experience, so it can be argued that the conflicts which arise between them may also reflect conflicts of

interest as these are experienced in the wider social context of the individuals concerned.

### **Violence at bhangra gigs: A discourse of inter-racial politics among Asians in Newcastle**

Violence between young Asian men has been a perennial problem at bhangra gigs in Newcastle. According to some observers, such violence, which, as I stated earlier, recently resulted in all of the major Newcastle nightclubs imposing an indefinite ban on bhangra events, is rarely if ever encountered at similar events in other cities. While I am unable to qualify such comments myself, I would, nevertheless, want to argue that the incidence of violence at bhangra gigs in Newcastle can once again be attributed to issues of locality. Firstly and perhaps primarily, disputes arising at bhangra gigs appear to correspond very closely with the racial and religious conflicts of interest which characterise Newcastle's wider Asian population. In addition, such violence is exacerbated through conflicts between those who maintain a more orthodox line of religious belief and those who have chosen to adopt westernised traits, but who, for reasons already discussed, continue to attend bhangra gigs and other Asian events. I will consider each of these issues in turn.

Appadurai has used the term 'ethnoscape' to describe "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons" (1990, p.297). As Smart, in addressing this concept, has pointed out, 'ethnoscapes' "allow us to recognise that our notions of space, place and community have become much more complex, indeed a 'single community' may now be dispersed across a variety of sites" (1993a, p.147). Smart's observation and its implications for the relevance of the term 'community' has a particular bearing on the experiences of ethnic minority groups in contemporary urban Britain and other developed countries around the world. Indeed, Solomos and Back are highly critical of the term 'community' as this is often applied to ethnic minority groups, suggesting that such "identifications" do not relate to "'natural communities' (but rather) constitute moments where community and identity are defined: manifestations of racial and ethnic closure" (1994, p.157). This argument was reiterated by an Asian community worker in Newcastle who suggested that the term Asian 'community' and its common positioning as a form of ethnic 'subculture' existing within contemporary urban Britain is essentially a misnomer. The problem with

this term, he suggested, is that it tends to gloss over the various conflicts of interest which arise between the differing religious and cultural interests that comprise the so-called 'Asian communities' in Britain.

Nevertheless, during the course of my research in Newcastle, I found references to the 'Asian community' to be a common aspect of popular discourse, not only in the case of white observers but also when talking to Asians. When situating themselves in relation to Newcastle's white population, Asians routinely used the term 'Asian community' as a means of demarcating their own sense of collective identity. Clearly then the notion of community as this relates to the Asian population in Britain is both highly complex and contradictory. While it may function on the one hand as a means by which Asians are able to define their otherness from white-Britain, the obverse side of this form of identification is a rather strained notion of 'community'; a series of diffuse populations striving to maintain their own collective cultural identities. Expanding upon this last point, Goulbourne has argued that

... as the British nation continues to be defined largely in ethnic terms and thereby excludes the legitimate membership of non-white minorities, groups recently settled in Britain are wont to look to their original homelands for security and a sense of certainty. The mobilization of their own distinctive ethnicity will be one important way of asserting difference (1991, p.126).

Similarly, in discussing the subject of immigration, Weinreich has argued that conflicts over the issue of ethnic identity are inevitable in the case of displaced "groups that become situated in proximity to one another" (1992, p.300). The precise nature of such conflicts and the ways in which they are staged will in turn vary depending upon the particularities of locality, that is to say, upon factors such as the socio-spatial organisation of ethnic minority groups and the nature and availability of cultural resources. Speaking about such inter-racial conflicts among Asians living in Britain and relating this to the particular problems encountered in Newcastle, an Asian youth worker in the city made the following observation:

*There are always divisions between different Asian communities. For example, within the Pakistani community, they tend to divide up again in terms of the parent language so the Punjabi speakers might have their own distinct group ... Other language speakers have their own distinct groups as well and the way that this transforms itself is that people form little pockets of power ... often*



*management committees at Mosques or community centres ... Now, in Newcastle, the main black populations are Pakistani Muslim and Bengali Muslim. The Bengali community is divided again within itself because one set controls the community centre and the other set control the Mosque ... they don't speak to each other and nobody, even they themselves, can explain why it is that they don't get on. You've obviously got the same problem between different religions. Take for instance Kingsley Terrace up in Fenham. All Asians. But you'll have a Pakistani Muslim family living next door to a Sikh family and they won't talk to each other. Now, this creates divisions and it's often because of these divisions that young people see divisions for themselves as well.*

Paradoxically then, a potential effect of cultural events which are designed to bring groups of Asians together could be in fact to highlight and perhaps intensify the types of divisions referred to above. As I have previously pointed out in this chapter, due to the lack of leisure facilities which exist for ethnic minority groups in Newcastle, the staging of a bhangra gig in the city provides one of the few occasions on which young Asians are able to gather in large numbers. I have also suggested that, for many young Asians, such gatherings provide an opportunity to engage in a collective celebration of tradition which is not possible at other times. In staging such celebrations, however, it follows that young people will be, to a greater or lesser extent, directed by the beliefs and practices which inform the respective religions - primarily Hindu, Muslim and Sikh - to which they belong. Effectively then, in using bhangra music in this way, young people will highlight the religious and other cultural differences which exist between themselves. Moreover, the ways in which such differences are in turn negotiated by young people will depend largely upon how these differences are seen to be negotiated by significant others such as parents and local religious figures.

Indeed, much of the violence which occurs at bhangra gigs in Newcastle appears to result from young people of different religions acting out for themselves those same divisions and conflicts which characterise the social fabric of the city's wider Asian population. This is clearly illustrated in the following account by a young Sikh man: *"I was at this bhangra do one night with some mates and this Pakistani lad knocks into me and starts giving me hassle. So we starts arguing. All the Pakistani lads join in on his side and all the Sikh lads joined in with me and we had this big fight"*. A Muslim man in his early twenties who had attended many of the Bhangra gigs in Newcastle spoke to me at length about the violence which he had

witnessed and provided his own conceptualisation of the problem which, he surmised, resulted from the disjunctive quality of the event itself. Thus, he argued

*... these bhangra occasions are basically to say 'well look, we know you guys like it so why don't yous all come down and have a good time 'cause it's not very often that you're provided with what you want' ... but they say 'well why should I be in the same room with X, Y and Z?' So all that happens is that it erupts into a massive fight between factions ... so that the Pakistani lads say 'we're gonna sort the Sikhs out' and the Sikhs and Pakistanis say 'were gonna sort the Hindus out' ... it basically spoils the whole occasion ... so the music, it just plays a small part really.*

It is interesting to note how, in the above account, the sensibilities relating to religious belief are deemed to cancel out those governing musical taste with the effect that the music itself becomes a relatively insignificant part of a bhangra gig. It seems to me, however, that incidences of violence such as those just described occur not because the sensibilities of musical taste are subverted by those of religious belief but rather because modern bhangra music addresses both of these discourses simultaneously. As I have previously pointed out, in much the same way that other forms of popular music and their attendant styles are often constructed via an ad hoc 'borrowing' of cultural resources from around the world (the increasing centrality of this trend having been considered in chapter three's account of modern sampling techniques) so the re-invention of bhangra was also achieved via the merging of traditional Punjabi folk styles with elements of western pop thus erasing forever bhangra's exclusive association with the Punjab. Indeed, it is significant in this respect that for many consumers of bhangra the music is now associated as closely with 'Bollywood', the nickname for the South Asian popular culture industry located in Bombay, as with it is with the Punjab. At the same time, however, because of the nature of its audience, bhangra has retained its significance as a folk form. Appealing as it does to a range of displaced Asian populations scattered around various parts of the western world, modern bhangra has become a form of *popularised* folk music.

Moreover, this fragmentation of the music and its meaning has meant that members of each religion, while they may collectively celebrate bhangra's Punjabi origins, are also able to relate their own forms of cultural significance to those occasions during which bhangra music is consumed. Thus, relating this interpretation of bhangra's musical significance back to the local experience of

Asians in Newcastle, there is a clear sense in which bhangra audiences in the city become multiply situated in terms of their reception of the music. While on the one hand a bhangra event is used by many as an occasion on which to stage a celebration of tradition, on the other hand such celebrations will in every instance be mediated by the meanings which the music gives to particular notions of ethnic identity and how these identities are understood in terms of the broader sets of relationships which characterise the local Asian population. Thus, while it is not my intention to suggest that the music itself is directly responsible for the incidence of violence at bhangra gigs in Newcastle, at the same time it seems clear to me that the floating discourses which are inherent in the bhangra text resonate perfectly with the tension which builds as a disparate affiliation of cultural and religious practises struggles on the one hand to present an image of coherence and strength to the local white populace while at the same time engaging in a series of internal struggles concerning more particularised notions of ethnic identity.

If the incidence of violence at bhangra gigs in Newcastle can in many ways be linked to the inter-racial conflicts occurring within Newcastle's Asian population, conflicts which as we have seen, are bound up with issues of religion and tradition, then the appropriation by some Asians in the city of western traits has served to create further tension among audiences at these events. As I have already pointed out, for many of those young people who have broken away or been excluded from traditional Asian life because of their adoption of western attitudes and habits, bhangra events provide one of the few occasions on which they are able to socialise with other Asians and thus retain their respective networks of friends and peers. At the same time, however, bhangra gigs also act as a medium for those young people who have rejected religious practices and other aspects of Asian custom to articulate their own sense of ethnic identity. Such alternative articulations of ethnic identity have also proved to be a source of conflict at bhangra gigs. In a setting where many of the social actors are highly sensitised to the need to be seen to endorse fundamental aspects of their respective traditional identities, those who detract from such traditions are often singled out and stigmatised. Indeed, because the majority of Asians in Newcastle are Muslim or of Muslim origin and because, as we have already seen, young people's affiliation to the Muslim faith is now such that even non-practising Muslims continue to identify very strongly with aspects of Muslim belief, much anger is caused by those who accuse young Muslims of deserting their faith. Thus, for example, a young Muslim man, who has himself been the subject of such stigmatisation at bhangra gigs in Newcastle, made the following observation:

*There's a lot of Muslim people now who, like me, drink alcohol. A lot of the bhangra dos now take place in clubs and obviously there are bars there. Sometimes lads will come up to you and say 'why are you drinking, you're supposed to be a Muslim?'. It can get really heated sometimes, I've seen fights and all sorts. They just can't seem to understand. There's all this narrow minded codswallop that says 'well if you're a Muslim you're supposed to do this but you can't do that'. It's sickening sometimes.*

Again, the westernised sensibility of Asians in Newcastle is itself strongly mediated by forms of local knowledge. Thus, for many Asians their embracing of western lifestyles is based closely around what they know about the tastes and leisure preferences of the local white 'Geordie' youth. This was clearly illustrated by the references of several Asian youths who I interviewed to their trips "*down the Bigg Market*", a district in Newcastle city centre with a large number of pubs and clubs making it a popular weekend nightspot. Hollands has suggested that: "The importance of the Bigg Market for many young adults, relates to the fact that it is an important site for the modern expression of what it means to be a working class Geordie in a post-industrial climate" adding that "the Bigg Market phenomenon ... is an illustrative case study of post adolescence and the ritualization of local identity" (1995, p.56). From the point of view of the young Asian this ritualisation of local identity becomes a double articulation as any expression of affinity with the Bigg Market is not only a powerful statement of association with western customs but also an indication of the individual's acceptance into the 'Geordie culture'.

Moreover, there is a clear sense in which such a ritualisation can also be seen to contribute to the violence which has been observed at *bhangra gigs* in Newcastle. For many of those young Asians who choose to articulate their association with the sensibilities of local white youth through an identification with the Bigg Market, it becomes necessary in turn to absorb and re-enact the local knowledges and urban myths which have grown up around this aspect of Newcastle nightlife. A particularly resilient stereotype in popular representations of the Bigg Market is that of "Bigg Market brawling".<sup>8</sup> Despite recent attempts to dispel this myth,<sup>9</sup> for many the Bigg Market continues to be strongly associated with an atmosphere of aggression often erupting into acts of violence. Such representations in turn become a testing board for many young Asian men in their articulation of the

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from the article "A Tale of Two Cities" by Neil Armstrong, featured in *The Crack*, October 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See Hollands (1995, p.56).

Geordie identity. A Muslim man in his late twenties who had himself previously visited the Bigg Market on a regular basis gave me the following graphic account:

*When you go down the Bigg Market well it's all sort of image, public image. At one time black guys were afraid to go down the Bigg Market at any time of day ... I mean I used to think 'well, I've heard such bad things about it' and I was expecting to just walk down there at ten o'clock in the morning and somebody'd drag you into the back lane and beat you up, which is of course not the case. When I started going down there sort of ... eh well other people would start going down and you'd get a bit more confidence ... it's like, you'll get this image through going out down the Bigg Market with all the big, tough drug dealing white guys (laughs) ... but really, that's how some of the Asian lads sees it ... so then they says 'well we have to keep up our reputation' so they gets into fighting within themselves and it develops from there.*

The problem of violence at bhangra gigs in Newcastle then, as with the other types of audience behaviour examined here, must be viewed in the context of the various local knowledges and sensibilities which inform those individuals who converge on the dancefloor. Thus, while such violence may result from a common desire on the part of the differing collectivities present at a bhangra gig to articulate their respective and in many cases competing notions of ethnic identity to each other, such identities and the forms of tension which are seen to exist between them are in their turn framed within a locally defined discourse which supplies Asians living in Newcastle with a series of options as to how the notion of ethnicity is be constructed and mediated to others. Again, the incidence of violence at Newcastle bhangra events and the conflicting locally grounded sensibilities which give rise to it cut firmly against the grain of those studies which argue that bhangra functions to unite Asian youth in Britain by giving the latter a common form of 'subcultural' identity. Thus, in this particular instance, rather than serving to unify Asian youth in a collective struggle against white oppression, bhangra music plays a central role in reaffirming cultural and religious differences between young Asians. That bhangra is seen to perform such a role provides a further evidence of the gulf between the abstract concept of 'subculture' and the real life situations in which young people acquire musical taste and use such taste as forms of collective expression.

If locality is to be understood as primarily responsible for structuring those options which exist for ethnic minority groups to articulate notions of ethnicity then it must

also be seen as ultimately responsible for posing the limitations which ethnic minority groups see for themselves in attempting to stage such articulations. I have already discussed this issue to some extent in considering the significance of bhangra events for Asians in Newcastle as one of the few opportunities to collectively celebrate traditional Asian life. In Newcastle, however, it is not simply the notion of traditional ethnic identity which is problematic. The incidence of racism, particularly in the west of the city, has problematised the whole issue of race and ethnicity. Indeed some observers believe that the added tensions and frustrations created among the youth of ethnic minority groups by the behaviour of white racists have also contributed in their own way to the violent outbursts witnessed at bhangra gigs. Thus, as a local bhangra DJ put it, *"part of the reason for this violence is that people are feeling so oppressed ... they don't have the strength to fight against the attackers, so they begin to fight amongst themselves in a desperate bid to vent their anger"*. The problem of racism in Newcastle has in part inspired the growth of another music driven sensibility among young Asians in which bhangra is again being used as a pivotal discursive text. Significantly, this particular usage of bhangra does indeed have the effect of uniting young Asians from differing cultural and religious backgrounds in the manner described by those theorists who have conceptualised bhangra as a form of subcultural text. This said, however, the aim of this united Asian youth sensibility of using bhangra as a way of achieving racial harmony with Newcastle's white population is equally at odds with the notion of a bhangra-centred Asian youth subculture as the other forms of localised response to bhangra thus far considered in this chapter. Similarly, this particular usage of bhangra again provides a clear instance of how mass cultural commodities and technical innovations may work to an emancipatory effect by providing a form of address for issues of racism and racial exclusion and the often deeply ingrained cultural biases which give rise to such issues.

### **The 'Bhangra Bandits': 'Doesn't matter if you're black or white!'**

*We're doing a show called the 'Bhangra Bandits' which is basically a show which fuses bhangra with all other types of music, be it jazz, or reggae, hip hop, soul ... anything. Just to prove that bhangra isn't something that should be isolated* (Programme DJ).

The 'Bhangra Bandits' is broadcast weekly on Kool FM, a community radio station established several years ago by a group of enthusiasts keen to promote contemporary dance music forms, such as rap, jungle and bhangra, which

currently receive little airplay on the major radio stations. While I do not have the space here to engage in an extensive discussion of the politics relating to radio broadcasting, it is important nevertheless to point out that, as with other aspects of popular music, academic writing on radio has tended to focus upon its national and commercial contexts. In particular, work on radio has emphasised the role of the latter as a “‘feeder’ institution” for the product of the mainstream music industry, while the function of local community based radio stations, although not completely ignored by the literature,<sup>10</sup> has yet to be fully realised (Stratton: 1983, p.295). In recent years the growth of community based radio stations, particularly pirate radio, has opened up new possibilities for the interplay between the use of radio formats and the nuances of locality. As one pirate radio DJ has put it: “All we talk about is the latest tune, who’s playing it, where he’s playing it, what the rave was like last night”.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Jones has argued that: “Pirate radio, as an alternative to more mainstream ...radio, has a format which gives certain excluded groups access to cultural resources and representation. Pirate radio also provides an outlet for non-mainstream music and local artists. Most importantly, it is a network of representation for ethnic communities” (1995, P.1). Another characteristic trait of both pirate radio and many of the newer community based legal radio stations is the emphasis which is often placed, in keeping with the sensibilities of contemporary urban dance music, upon the role of the DJ as a primary interlocutor of the musical text. In the context of community broadcasting then, music itself may function as a resource for addressing local issues such as the problem of racism or broader themes relating to the issue of race relations.

Kool FM’s the ‘Bhangra Bandits’ is one such example of an attempt, using the medium of music, to address the problem of race relations as this is experienced in Newcastle. Using bhangra as a central musical theme in the programme, young Asian men and women are given the opportunity to become community DJs, mixing bhangra tracks together with other forms of contemporary music such as rap and house. The aim of those involved with the ‘Bhangra Bandits’ is to effectively re-invent the bhangra sound and, in doing so, articulate their own localised interpretation of the syncretic quality which they identify with bhangra and other forms of popular music. Thus, as one of the programme’s organisers explained to me

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Hind and Mosco (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the article “The Jungle Telegraph” by Alex Spillius featured in The Guardian Weekend, January 28th 1995.

*...on this show we want to appeal to a wide audience. It's a dance music station and we know that in addition to Asians we're gonna have a lot of white people listening to the music too. We want to show that the basis of all music is that it is made up of beats and rhythms and that it can be combined well. So what we do is we mix bhangra with dance music, which is what I like, house music in particular, Afro-Caribbean ragga ... which is mixing dance with reggae beats ... and we'll use rap as well. Then within that we might also include something like Peter Gabriel.*

In addressing the deeper political agenda of the 'Bhangra Bandits', one of the DJs who features in the programme spoke of the need to get away from the archetypal image of the Asian as someone who wishes to remain distanced from British social life and whose own way of life is completely at odds with the rest of Britain. Indeed, that such stereotypes remain fixed in the British popular imagination is undoubtedly the primary motive for the continuing high incidence of racism directed against Asians in Britain. The exceptionally intense nature of such racism has been well documented in the literature on youth culture. In particular, theorists have often suggested that the perceived "out-and-out alien characteristics" of Asians serve to make them "the object of a purer hatred" which is not directed at other 'black' ethnic minority groups, who, if not totally accepted by white Britain are, nevertheless, deemed to be *more* acceptable than ethnic minorities of Asian origin (Gilroy and Lawrence: 1988, p.143). This sentiment is well captured by Pearson in his semi-ethnographic account of 'paki-bashing' in a Lancashire town:

The West Indian is 'more like us'. He speaks our language (or so we tell ourselves) and he is of our culture - or so we fool ourselves. 'Pakis' (that is, Indians and Pakistanis) on the other hand are not like us at all, or so the distinction says: they speak a different language, they eat peculiar food which does not smell like our food, and they keep to themselves (1976, p.50).

Similarly, it is also widely acknowledged by social theorists that the white appropriations, for example in the case of the skinheads,<sup>12</sup> of musical and stylistic innovations associated with African and Afro-Caribbean cultures has served to some extent to demystify the latter and resulted in a certain degree of tolerance and acceptance of these ethnic groups on the part of white Britons. Likewise, white British appropriations of Afro-American music and style have worked to a broadly

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Hebdige (1976).



similar effect in facilitating a wider acceptance of blacks in Britain. Thus, as Back argues: "Young white people may (now) have more in common with Bobby Brown than John Bull, with the result that it is impossible to speak of a black culture in Britain separately from the culture of Britain as a whole" (1993, p.218). Again, however, such shifts in the relations between black and white Britain have done little to change popular perceptions of Asians. Thus, despite the affinity of many young Asians with the lifestyle orientations and cultural practises of 90s Britain, Asian communities are still considered by many to exist at the margins of British life. Indeed, as a newspaper report on this issue has stated: "The constant conflict between a sense of ease and familiarity with British culture and a sense of rejection and frustration created by racism is a problem for all Asian youth".<sup>13</sup>

Again, the problem of racist behaviour against Asians in Britain, while obviously a national issue, must be addressed at a local level if it is to be properly understood and indeed successfully tackled. Thus, as Smith argues "forms of racial antipathy (often) exhibit marked variations according to demographic, socio-economic and locational criteria" (1989, pp. 148-149). In west Newcastle, a particularly intense form of what Back refers to as "neighbourhood nationalism" is exercised against all ethnic minority groups. According to Back, "neighbourhood nationalism" defines the attempt by residents in particular localities to "shrink" the nation "to a size which mirrors (the) immediate set of social relations within the neighbourhood" (1993, p.220). As I have previously pointed out, Newcastle's predominantly white environment acts as a block to the types of multi-cultural discourse existing in many other cities. This in turn ensures that highly localised meanings of race are constructed which effectively function to exclude all non-white ethnic groups. Thus, in the west of Newcastle all non-white residents tend to be treated as outsiders by white racist aggressors. As one Afro-Caribbean resident put it: *"Racist behaviour is highly concentrated in the west end. Occasionally it does rear its head in the town and it usually results in a punch up or two, whereas when it's highly concentrated in an area such as Elswick then the effects are much worse"*. The point remains, however, that because Asians constitute the larger and thus more directly visible ethnic minority group in west Newcastle they are more easily targeted by white racist residents and thus more commonly subject to racism and racial abuse. The following accounts are drawn from a discussion which took place between myself and a group of young Asians during a meeting of the Black Youth Collective. The latter was established to allow young Asians and Afro-

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from the article "What *really* angers young Asians" by Kenan Malik, featured in the Independent On Sunday, June 25th 1995.

Caribbeans living in west Newcastle to meet with community workers in order to discuss a range of issues including the problem of racial harassment:

Mehli: *When I came here (to Newcastle) I couldn't speak a word of English. The kids who I went to school with taught me English ... and all the swear words too. Now those same kids swear at me.*

Abdul: *The young kids are the worst, they are really insulting ... but you know you can't do anything otherwise you'd be in trouble yourself so you just leave them.*

Mehli: *Yes but it's the parents who start it. They'll say things like 'go over there and spit on that darkie' to their kids and that's how the kids learn it.*

Significantly, when the organisers of the 'Bhangra Bandits' first launched the programme, they recruited many of their young DJs from the Black Youth Collective. As such there is a particularly keen awareness among those young people who feature in the programme of the need begin to tackle the misconceptions which continue to dominate white perceptions of Asians in Newcastle. At the same time, however, it is also recognised that because of the absence of a strong Asian and Afro-Caribbean presence in the city, and the particular bearing which this has upon local levels of racial tolerance, the medium of community radio is the logical starting point for this type of project. Conversations with 'Bhangra Bandits' DJs inevitably led to comparisons between their role in the community and that of Afro-American community DJs who often operate literally at 'street level' using a turntable and portable speakers or, alternatively, a 'ghetto-blasters'. Thus, as one of the 'Bhangra Bandits' DJs explained:

Avtar: *I think most of the kids who work on the programme would love to have a go at that ... I myself would love to take a ghetto-blasters out on my shoulder, but, eh it'll be taken off my shoulder very quickly.*

A.B.: *By whom?*

Avtar: *For want of better wording, it would basically be done by misguided white youths. But then again, getting to try your hand on a community radio station is better anyway because it's gonna be much better quality, and because of the way*

*things are here (in Newcastle) you're gonna get a lot more respect for it. People are actually gonna pay attention and listen to it.*

The collective sensibility which underpins the aims of the 'Bhangra Bandits' project works out of a local knowledge base in which the nuances and complexities of the race problematic in Newcastle are minutely understood. Rather than aggravating the problem by attempting to focus attention on the area of the city in which racism is most highly concentrated, the programme provides a vehicle for young Asians to articulate their chosen form of cultural message at a city-wide level. Indeed, the medium of community radio allows for a much wider form of engagement with the issue of multi-cultural relations in Newcastle. As those who work on the 'Bhangra Bandits' concede, thus acknowledging the wider processes of ethnic closure operating in the city, the problems of exclusion and racial discrimination facing Asians in Newcastle are not merely associated with the issue of racism. Rather, there is an overall ignorance and indeed indifference on the part of the city's predominately white populace regarding the nature of Asian life and the way in which this is steadily changing as new generations of Asians become increasingly westernised in terms of their social sensibilities and lifestyle orientations. Indeed, during the course of my own research in Newcastle, it quickly became evident to me that many young white people in the city continue to think of Asian minority groups as both socially and culturally removed from British life, a preconception which appears to routinely inform their mode of thinking about every aspect of Asian culture as this manifests itself in Britain. This is clearly illustrated in the following extract from a discussion group in which young white people were asked to give their views on bhangra music:

A.B.: *What do you think of bhangra?*

John: *I've never been to India (all laugh).*

A.B.: *None of you have ever been to a bhangra gig then?*

Sue: *What is bhangra?*

Rick: *Yeah, what is it?*

Vicky: *You know, it's that Indian music where they sing really weird.*

Rick: *Oh I know now, it's like Indian dance music.*

A.B.: *Yes that's right, what do you think of it?*

Rick: *I don't like it man, it does your head in.*

Vicky: *I suppose if you've been brought up with that sort of singing and that sort of thing ... I suppose you could appreciate it ... but I haven't been brought up with that sort of singing and so I don't like it. It really does my head in. If I get an Indian channel on or something, I turn it off ...*

Rick: *Straight off yeah!*

Vicky: *I just have a quick laugh and turn it off.*

Such responses were typical of the young white people to whom I spoke. On the one hand many of them had little idea what bhangra was while others automatically associated it with the Indian films which they had seen on TV and thus with the most instantly accessible if obviously alien image of Asian life. In its re-working of the bhangra style the 'Bhangra Bandits' programme hopes to make bhangra more accessible to young white people and thus to revise their perception, not only of the music itself, but also of Asian youth and the increasing affinity of the latter with the lifestyle orientations of white British youth. Some evidence that this approach may yet serve to effect at least an element of change in the local white youth's responses to bhangra music and thus begin to draw their attention to Asian youth's increasing proximity to the lifestyle orientations of contemporary Britain is provided in the further discussion group extract in which both white and Asian youths were invited to give their views on bhangra. While the responses of the white participants were initially similar to those presented above, a series of significant modifications in response were evident after Asian participants drew attention to the diverse influences and styles which now comprise the bhangra sound:

A.B.: *Where do you think bhangra's going?*

Jim: *It's going to be kept in the Asian community ... I can't see it going any further really.*

A.B.: *So you don't think bhangra will cross over into the mainstream?*

Jim: *No, not like reggae, I mean like that crossed over no problem.*

A.B.: *Why do you think that white people go for reggae but they won't go for bhangra?*

Steve: *I think it's actually the way that the music sounds and the way the singer ... I mean I can't ... that's the thing that gets on my nerves like, the high pitched women singing and the instruments aghh ... Indian music, I really hate it. Like with reggae, you can listen to that, it's more bass and the singing is really good ... but Indian music, that high pitched singing they do ...*

Harpal: *Yes but the thing with reggae is like, they're singing in English ... patois is a form of English. Now of course you're not gonna understand Indian ... and eh, how can you say it's a daft accent? Now if I was to play you an Indian reggae song or one of the new Bally Sagoo one's or something like, you'd be lying if you said you didn't like it at all.*

Steve: *Aye maybes your right, perhaps I'm not being fair like. The only stuff I've actually heard is that stuff they play on the films late at night ... so if I heard bhangra, I might like it.*

In many ways the above extracts provide a further example of how local knowledges impose their own particularised forms of social discourse on the meanings which are attached to musical texts and also re-emphasise the locally constructed nature of the struggles which ensue over musical meanings. As such the 'Bhangra Bandits' can also be understood as the product of a distinctly localised sensibility in that it both reads and attempts to engage with the misconceptions concerning bhangra and the music's position in relation to other forms of popular music as these are manifested at a local level. As one of the DJs put it: *"Apart from Asians not many people in this city know about bhangra and those that do don't understand it. We're trying to change that"*. Moreover, in offering up its reconstructed bhangra sound as a means prizing open sensitive issues of racism and racial exclusion in Newcastle, the 'Bhangra Bandits' simultaneously illustrates a further sense in which modern technologies, mass media formats and commercial products, rather than conspiring to close off particularised forms of cultural expression, can positively enhance the latter. The 'Bhangra Bandits' DJs' creative use of the technologies and musical resources at their disposal provides an

important means of negotiating a deeply ingrained situation of ethnic closure in Newcastle and one which, for reasons already made clear, would otherwise remain impassable.

I began this chapter by drawing attention to the tendency among writers to theorise unproblematically the role of bhangra in acting as vehicle for a common form of cultural expression amongst Asian communities in Britain. More specifically, I suggested, bhangra is routinely cast as the soundtrack for a new form of Asian youth subculture. Subsequently, I have been concerned to challenge such an essentialist viewpoint by illustrating how bhangra, despite the music's strong associations with the ontology of the Asian immigrant, becomes crossed by local knowledges and sensibilities to the extent that its meaning must in each case be understood as forming part of a highly particularised and autonomously constructed social discourse. Drawing upon the results of empirical research carried out in Newcastle upon Tyne, I have attempted to demonstrate how the collective *uses* of bhangra music by the city's young Asians, together with the various statements and expressions of ethnic identity which such uses are intended to articulate, are in each instance underscored by local knowledges, that is to say, by forms of knowledge and attendant sensibilities acquired as a direct result of living in Newcastle. As such, it seems clear to me that bhangra's social significance is wholly irreducible to the subcultural trope within which it is typically situated, the latter merely serving to replicate the essentialist and sociologically unworkable frameworks which flaw the original CCCS work.

If bhangra is frequently interpreted in such a narrow way by theorists of youth and popular music, then the latter's treatment of more globally situated diaspora musics has been equally unresponsive to the multiplicity of localised meanings which have become inscribed within such musics. Significantly, in the case of musics such as rap and reggae, the effect of such globalisation processes has been to loosen them from their immediate socio-political contexts and invest them with new forms of meaning and authenticity. The response of many theorists, however, has been to simply to ignore such adaptations of these musical texts or to write them off as meaningless imitations, choosing instead to maintain a link between a given genre's authentic meaning and its point of origin. In chapter five I want to consider this bias in popular music writing in more detail with reference to hip hop, a genre which, despite its global status, is regularly represented as a form whose cultural authenticity can only be properly realised in the context of its Afro-American 'street' origins or its resonance with the experiences of the wider African diaspora.

## Chapter 5

### **Hip hop am Main, rappin' on the Tyne: Hip hop authenticity as a local construct - a comparative analysis**

"Aa dee it coz aa can green eggs and ham,  
 People always tell iz that am just like me mam,  
 Aa wuz born aa was bred in smelling distance  
 o the tyne (sic),  
 An a couldn't give a toss that the fogs not mine,  
 Aa like me blaa an a like a pint,  
 But ave never needed speed for an alreet neet,  
 Aa divvent drive a car 'coz they just get twoc'ed,  
 Me ken's kanny safe it's on top of a shop . . ."

(Ferank, Geordie poet and rapper:  
 1994)

As I illustrated at some length in part one of this study, the notion of pop as an 'authentic' form of youthful expression has become a deeply contentious issue in the sociologies of youth and popular music. In particular, while discussing the work of Hebdige (1979), I noted that this author systematically 'writes off' any attempt by consumers to attach authentic meaning to popular music and its attendant manifestations of style once these have been, in his view, appropriated from the *street* and repackaged as "profitable merchandise" (p.96). In my evaluation of Hebdige's 'incorporation thesis' I argued that a particularly problematic aspect of the latter is its insistence upon viewing the 'market' and the 'street' as mutually exclusive domains, a position which is particularly difficult to maintain, especially given that punk, the focal point of Hebdige's study, despite its self-styled street credentials, was the commercially orientated brainchild of ex-art student Malcolm McLaren and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood (Harron: 1990, p.197). I further suggested that, even given the fact that certain musical and stylistic innovations do indeed originate at street level, to simply suggest as Hebdige does that such forms can have no authentic meaning once they have been taken up by the popular culture industries and transformed into commercially available commodities precludes any consideration of the new forms of

significance which such commodities assume as they are appropriated and reworked by consumers.

Indeed, in more recent years the increasing globalisation of popular music forms and other popular culture resources has added considerable weight to the argument that notions of 'authenticity' are in each case local constructs. Thus, as Cohen points out: "The globalisation of cultural forms has been accompanied by a localisation of cultural identity and claims to authenticity, resulting in a tension or dialectic between the two trends" (1994, p.133). Significantly, however, theorists of popular music have been slow to respond to such processes of globalisation and their effects upon notions of musical authenticity. This is particularly noticeable in the case of hip hop, a genre which over the past decade has developed from an Afro-American street culture into a globally acknowledged medium of youthful expression. Studies of hip hop have tended to steer clear of any discussion of the way in which hip hop's meaning shifts and changes as it is taken up and used by different consumers around the globe. Instead hip hop studies doggedly fixate upon the genre's Afro-American significance, occasionally extending to a consideration of its place in the musical dialogue of what is termed the African-diaspora, an approach which also severely delimits theoretical representations of hip hop's cultural significance.

During the course of this chapter I will challenge such theoretical interpretations of hip hop. By means of a cross-national study, drawing upon the results of fieldwork conducted once again in Newcastle upon Tyne and also in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and considering the significance of hip hop for various youth groups located within these respective cities, I will suggest that arguments and discussions concerning the merits of hip hop as an authentic form of youthful expression correspond closely with the differing local social contexts in which hip hop culture is played out. Moreover, given that in each of these contexts certain groups of hip hop enthusiasts will indeed be shown to construct their version of hip hop culture around the Afro-American style, any contention that such versions are simply meaningless imitations of Afro-American hip hop is effectively removed by the locally grounded struggles over the claim to hip hop authenticity which inform such collective representations of the genre.



Focussing initially upon Frankfurt, I will endeavour to illustrate how the city's recent social history, characterised by a growing immigrant 'Gastarbeiter'<sup>1</sup> population as well as the continued presence, since the end of world war two, of US military personnel has had a particular bearing on the role of hip hop for the youth of Frankfurt. I will then move on to consider the local hip hop scene in Newcastle, where a predominantly white working class following has constructed a rather different range of meanings and authenticities around the hip hop genre. Although both the Frankfurt and Newcastle hip hop scenes can be said to be internally divided in that both comprise groups and individuals who actively contest the nature of the authentic hip hop identity, at the same time each of these scenes is circumscribed by a range of particularised local circumstances which greatly influence the way in which young hip hoppers in each city perceive their attachment to the hip hop genre. Thus, within the Frankfurt hip hop scene, there is an intimate understanding of the ethnic polarisation which occurs in the city, hip hop being utilised by some groups as a forum for addressing the problem of racial exclusion or, alternatively, as a form of resistance to the white German 'other'.

In Newcastle, however, where no such form of ethnic polarisation exists, at least inasmuch as this affects or is understood by those who are involved in the local hip hop scene, notions of hip hop resistance take on a rather different character. In the case of the Newcastle hip hop scene, the 'other' becomes the 'townie' whose essential shallowness, it is argued, is reflected in his/her fickle taste in music and fashion. Thus, despite their own internal conflicts and ideological divisions, hip hoppers in Newcastle commonly use the hip hop identity as a way of marking themselves out from what they perceive as an acutely conservative and pathological townie mentality.

The Frankfurt and Newcastle hip hop scenes also differ somewhat in terms of their gender composition. The Frankfurt scene, although predominantly male, is also characterised by a number of female hip hop enthusiasts and several female rap groups. This is indicative of the wider acceptance in Germany of women and girls taking part in both music consuming and music-making activities, a fact which is undoubtedly due in some part to the greater emphasis in the country upon music as a leisure resource and the community-based projects and training schemes which have consequently been established. Indeed, many such projects and

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<sup>1</sup> 'Gastarbeiter' or 'guest worker', to use the English translation, is the term applied to those individuals, typically from Turkey and Morocco, who have been granted special permission to enter Germany in order to meet the country's demand for unskilled manual labour.

schemes offer courses and workshops exclusively designed for women and girls.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, this scenario is in complete contrast to that depicted by Cohen in her account of music-making in Liverpool in which it is noted that girls were discouraged from taking part in community music projects for fear of being “criticized and called ‘slags’ (by their male counterparts) for wanting to do something that was mainly a boy’s activity” (1991, p.204). It seems to me that similar sensibilities act to prevent the participation of women in the Newcastle hip hop scene. Although none of my male interviewees claimed to object to female hip hoppers, their code of speech contained a number of male-centred forms such as ‘new jack’ and ‘homeboy’, which suggested that they considered hip hop culture to be an essentially male orientated pursuit.

Before going on to examine the respective manifestations of the hip hop identity outlined above in more detail, I want in the first instance to look briefly at the origins of the hip hop style. In doing so I will also consider how these origins have, in turn, given rise to a particular form of representation among theorists of hip hop culture in which attention is focussed primarily upon the Afro-American experience at the expense of any sustained attempt to deal with, or in many cases even to acknowledge, the articulation of the hip hop style beyond the inner-cities of North America.

### The origins and sociological representation of hip hop

Hip hop originated in New York during the early 1970s. Aware of the inner-city tensions that were being created as a consequence of urban renewal programmes and economic recession, an Afro-American street gang member who called himself Afrika Bambaataa formed ‘The Zulu Nation’ in an attempt to “channel the anger of young people in the South Bronx away from gang fighting and into music, dance, and graffiti” (Lipsitz: 1994, p.26). Hip hop has since become better known because of rap, the aspect of its style which has been most widely publicised<sup>3</sup> and marketed. Rap is a narrative form of vocal delivery which is spoken in a rhythmic patios over a continuous backbeat, the rhythms of the voice and the beat working together. According to Keyes, the distinctive vocal technique employed in rapping “can be traced from African bardic traditions to

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Pohl (1993) and Meinig (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Rap music, in particular ‘*gangsta rap*’ with the often violent and misogynistic overtones of its lyrics, has instilled a form of moral panic within white American society. Attempts by white institutions, notably the Parents Music Resource Center (see Epstein et al.: 1990), to censor rap lyrics has, according to Sexton, led to a form of “clinical paranoia” among black hip hop circles in the US (1995, p.2).

rural southern-based expressions of African Americans - toast, tales, sermons, blues, game songs, and allied forms - all of which are recited in a chanted rhyme or poetic fashion" (1991, p.40).

The beat in rap music is provided via a method known as 'scratch mixing' in which the dual turntable, originally developed to provide a continuous sequence of dance tracks in the discotheque or night club setting, itself becomes a musical instrument. Using one turntable to provide the rhythm, achieved through the manual manipulation of a record so that a selected sequence of bars are continually replayed, the DJ then uses the second turntable to mix in snatches of sound and instrumental themes from other records. In some respects 'scratch mixing' is similar to the 'house' style of mixing described in chapter three. A fundamental difference between 'scratch' and 'house' mixing, however, is that, in the case of the former, the records themselves are used to a rhythmic, percussive effect by rapidly running their grooves to and forth against the record player's stylus to produce a scratching noise which corresponds with the beat of the rhythm track.

In terms of its sociological representation, the origins and nature of hip hop have led to a particular style of theorising about the social significance of the genre which orientates almost exclusively around hip hop's dialogue with the ontology of the Afro-American youth. Beadle, for example, has suggested that rap is "to the black American urban youth more or less what punk was to its British white counterpart" (1993, p.77). Thus, argues Beadle, relying only upon the ability to "talk in rhythm", the art of rapping became the perfect "vehicle for pride and for anger, for asserting the self-worth of the community" (ibid., 85). Similarly, Decker's study of hip hop suggests that the genre is grounded in what the writer terms a "'sixties inspired hip hop nationalism'" which draws upon the sensibilities of the US black power movement (1994, pp.99-100).<sup>4</sup> The rise of hip hop as an aspect of Afro-American ghetto culture has also added weight to the argument of those who perceive the history of contemporary popular music as a struggle for the control of musical and stylistic resources between so-called 'authentic street cultures' and 'parasitic cultural industries'. This sentiment is captured vividly in a study by Light where it is argued that: "If this conflict is fundamental to all pop that is the product of youth culture, it is heightened immeasurably by rap's legitimately radical origins and intentions" (1992, p.232).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive account of the black power movement, see Carmichael and Hamilton (1968).

<sup>5</sup> See also Cross (1994).

In contrast, very little work has sought to understand rap and hip hop, together with their 'authentic' meanings, as 'locally' constructed phenomena. Only Lipsitz (1994) and Gilroy (1993) have offered any form of sustained analytical acknowledgement of hip hop's cultural role outside the USA. Again, however, there is a fundamental problem with such work in that its examination of hip hop, while more receptive to the notion of localisation, merely widens its mode of enquiry to focus upon an exposition of the genre's African-diasporic context. As such, these writers are simply replicating the argument of those theorists whose work fixates upon hip hop's unique resonance with the Afro-American experience. Thus, from the point of view of Lipsitz and Gilroy, hip hop's radical cast and intention are deemed to be inextricably linked to its African-diasporic roots. Followed to its logical conclusion, such an argument suggests that as soon as hip hop is removed from this context, that is, appropriated by groups and individuals with non-African-diasporic roots, such qualities simultaneously evaporate. Clearly, however, from the point of view of those who want to argue that hip hop's only authentic function is to strengthen the political identity of the African-diaspora, such a contention is also theoretically convenient in that it allows non-African-diasporic manifestations of hip hop culture to be simply written off as meaningless imitations.<sup>6</sup>

In reality, however, such inverted elitism swims against a tide of analytical thought which seeks to dismantle the notion that forms of cultural expression such as hip hop are the unique properties of particular 'displaced' social groups. Rather, it is held, the global flow of information, commodities and images ensures that cultural meanings and attendant notions of authenticity are constantly being remade by groups of consumers throughout the world (Smart: 1994, p.149). This process is well illustrated by Lull in his concept of *cultural reterritorialisation*. According to Lull this describes the way in which

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<sup>6</sup> Were sociologists of youth and popular music to attempt to argue a case for the increasing cultural importance of hip hop among white youth groups, then it is highly likely that they would resort to the contention which formally held sway among the CCCS theorists, i.e., that the structural link between Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean minority groups and white working class youth ensures the authentic translation of African-diasporic musics for young white working class audiences. It is my view that such a contention is just as invalid, from a sociological point of view, as those representations of hip hop which stress its essential blackness. During the course of my own analysis of white hip hop (in the context of the scene in Newcastle), I will develop my critique of the structuralist 'black culture, white youth' approach further, illustrating how the fact of black association among white working class youth cannot be reduced to such an essentialist interpretation but must be seen to be grounded in its own locally situated politics of cultural authenticity.

... the foundations of cultural territory - ways of life, artifacts, symbols, and contexts - are all open to new interpretations and understandings ... Because culture is constructed and mobile, it is also synthetic and multiple. Immigrant groups all over the world create local versions of distant cultures. But we must not think of cultural reterritorialization simply as a consequence of shifting populations. Cultural reterritorialization is part of life for people who never leave home too. Some of the most significant and vast cultural territories are mediated symbolic lands (1995, pp.159-160).

As I hope to illustrate in the following pages, such an approach is considerably more useful in attempting to assess the cultural impact of hip hop beyond the African-diasporic world than work which orientates purely around the perceived blackness of the genre. While such work may serve as a partial explanation for hip hop's international appeal, the very diversity of race and colour among those young people who consume it and who are themselves often involved in hip hop activities, such as graffiti,<sup>7</sup> break dancing and rapping, indicates that a rather different range of socio-cultural factors are also active in framing hip hop's function as an authentic medium of youthful expression in particular locations. I want now to begin to make a more detailed consideration of such factors with an examination of the local hip hop scene in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

### **Hip Hop am Main**

Frankfurt am Main is an international centre. The city's population currently stands at around 500,000 people of which approximately twenty-five per cent are foreign in origin. Many of Frankfurt's foreign residents, particularly the large Turkish and Moroccan populations, live in the city as 'Gastarbeiter' while many more have fled religious or political persecution in their home countries. Additionally, Frankfurt is the banking centre of Germany and a central European base for a range of multi-national companies. Thus, the city's shopping areas, business quarters and suburbs are filled with the sights and sounds of a variety of different national cultures. Indeed, the Frankfurter Flohmarkt (flea market), held each Saturday on the banks of the river Main, illustrates perfectly the mix of cultures which exist side by side in the city. To walk through the Flohmarkt is to experience at first hand the multicultural atmosphere of Frankfurt.

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<sup>7</sup> Aside from rap music, 'graffiti' is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of hip hop culture. However, because of the nature of this chapter's enquiry, which focusses primarily upon the local significance of rap, it will not be possible to engage in any in-depth discussion of hip hop graffiti. For a more informed analysis of the latter, see Lachmann (1988).

Hip hop music in Frankfurt also owes much to the international flavour of the city, albeit an internationalism borne out of a somewhat different historical circumstance. As with other German cities, hip hop in Frankfurt was partly influenced by the Afro-American rap songs heard on the radio. In terms of its accessibility to this medium, however, Frankfurt is especially privileged being the home of American Forces Network (AFN), the radio station and TV channels established to serve personnel of the US Army, which has maintained a presence in central Germany since the end of world war two. Indeed, AFN has become so popular in and around Frankfurt that the decision was recently made to leave the radio station operating when the last of the American Forces leave Germany in the summer of 1996.

Similarly, the presence of several large US Army bases in and around Frankfurt itself has meant that the local citizens have been constantly kept in touch with many aspects of American culture - particularly, American films, shown both in German and in their original English versions, American style diners and, most importantly, American music and fashion. Thus, as one interviewee explained: *"Frankfurt was introduced very early to soul, funk and so on. There were so many GIs here and they had such a great influence. So many new clubs opened while they were over here"*. Similarly, a second interviewee gave the following account: *"When I was about seven years old my family moved to Ginnheim (a town just outside of Frankfurt). On both sides of the apartment block where I lived were American Army quarters. The guys on one side used to listen to heavy metal music and the guys on the other played soul, funk and rap and stuff all the time"*.

It was within this rich interplay of cultural resources and information that the first Frankfurt hip hop 'posses' and rap 'crews' were formed. Significantly, however, the socio-historical context of hip hop in Frankfurt has also served to create much conflict within the local scene. Sachsenhausen, a district on the south bank of the river Main and a principle location for live music venues in the city is generally acknowledged as the place where the live hip hop scene in Frankfurt began. A local rapper of Spanish-German origin who worked in one of the district's bars remembers it thus: *"During the mid-1980s Sachsenhausen was a traditional meeting point for American GIs, many of whom were into hip hop. As a consequence, it was also the crystallisation point for the local hip hop scene. And that set a precedent y'know. In the beginning the Frankfurt hip hop scene modelled itself very much on the example set by the GIs"*.

As a general trend, however, this direction in the development of Frankfurt hip hop was rather short lived. A large percentage of Frankfurt's hip hop following comprises of young people from the city's numerous North African, South East Asian and Southern European ethnic minority groups. In due course a number of these young people, particularly those who came from 'Gastarbeiter' families and whose social status in Germany, as I will go on to consider in more detail later, remained decidedly unclear, began to make the realisation that, as with the Afro-Americans, theirs was a "distinct mode of lived blackness" which demanded its own localised and particularised mode of expression (Gilroy: 1993, p.82). This situation was neatly summed up by an Afro-American rapper in a recent German TV documentary about rap music and hip hop culture in Germany who said "we've found our way of communicating ...and now the German rappers have got to do that too".<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, such groups began to seek ways in which to rework hip hop into a form which could be used as a vehicle for the expression of more locally relevant themes and issues (I will consider some of the specific ways in which this has been achieved later in the chapter). Nevertheless, the fact that the hip hop scene in Frankfurt had been initially influenced to such a great extent by Afro-American representations of the genre meant that these representations also continued to play a role in the formulation of local hip hop sensibilities. Indeed, even today, for many enthusiasts hip hop continues to make 'authentic' sense only in its Afro-American context. Thus, as one young hip hopper argued:

*How can you talk about German hip hop, what meaning does it have? What are you gonna do, sing about the ghetto? We don't have any over here! I'm into hip hop because of where it's at now y'know. It's a good style, you shouldn't mess with it. Some of those black guys are so cool. I look up to them and respect them. They've got their act together haven't they. When I go out on the street, they're the ones I'm thinking about, that's who I wanna be like y'know.*

While it could be argued that such young people, many of whom are also members of ethnic minority groups in Frankfurt, are similarly using hip hop as a way of marking themselves out from the city's white population, their particular way of achieving this clearly relies upon a different strategy to that of actively reworking hip hop. Thus, in this case the realisation of the hip hop identity relates not to the genre's potential to enter into an intimate dialogue with the particularities

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<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from the documentary 'Lost in Music' broadcast on ZDF, March 1993.

of urban life for ethnic minority groups in Germany but orientates rather around the possibility which it presents for the formulation of a romanticised association with the Afro-American experience. At the same time, however, the existence of such a hip hop sensibility in Frankfurt cannot be regarded as simply an imitation of Afro-American hip hop. It is rather the case that, due to the socio-historical context of hip hop in Frankfurt, such a sensibility is able to lay its own particularised claim to hip hop authenticity. Indeed, as I will go on to consider in more depth later, if the socio-historical context of hip hop in Frankfurt lends a substantial amount of credence to such representations of hip hop culture, then there is also much about the visual image of the city itself which serves to perpetuate such Afro-Americanised versions of the hip hop sensibility. Furthermore, as the US army prepares to leave Frankfurt, following the cessation of the Cold War hostilities, there are clear indications that Afro-American rap music will not only continue to be highly influential in Frankfurt but is itself set to become an integral part of the local hip hop scene. Thus, as a journalist working for a local hip hop magazine explained to me:

*Infracom (a small independent hip hop label in Frankfurt) have recently signed a US rap group called Poverty. They were all stationed over here in the army and now they want to stay here and try and develop their career as a rap group. You get that quite a lot. Or American soldiers stationed over here invite relatives over who are into rap and hip hop and they like it here so they decide to stay. In the US there's a lot of competition, very hard competition, between rappers ... on every street corner there are ten rappers trying to get a recording deal. It's a lot easier for them over here, particularly if they come from the ghetto, the way of life is much less aggressive here ... and the labels are often attracted to them, not least of all because they know that with any luck they can sell their records in the US which means a lot of money for them.*

Interestingly, such instances of ex-patriate musicians and singers exploiting ready-made niches of exclusivity are becoming increasingly common. During the two and a half years in which I lived in Frankfurt, I also encountered a number of US jazz and blues musicians who had unofficially emigrated to Germany in search of work. That several of these musicians had become highly successful in Frankfurt was largely down to the 'enhanced' artistic and charismatic status which was automatically conferred upon them when they began to perform in the city. Thus, if an improvised jazz session featuring Afro-American musicians is commonplace in New York, in Frankfurt it is a spectacle. The audience is attracted to the



performance not simply because of the music but also because of the 'authentic' aura which the musicians bring to the music. A parallel logic can be applied in the case of the traditional Peruvian folk groups whose 'busker-style' performances are becoming a regular feature of the street music heard in major cities around the world. Similarly, Nadelson's biographical account *Comrade Rock Star* (1991) relates the story of Dean Read, an ordinary singer/guitarist from the US who became, according to Nadelson, the Elvis Presley of the Soviet Union.

Returning to hip hop in Frankfurt, as the brief historical overview presented above begins to illustrate, in the ten years since its inception the local scene has become the site of a series of aesthetic tensions. On the one hand it is characterised by those who are attempting to fashion a distinctly localised version of the hip hop genre in which local themes and issues are addressed. On the other hand, the scene also provides a forum for a range of production and consumption sensibilities which orientate around an Afro-American vision of hip hop culture. The resulting tensions are perhaps most clearly evidenced by the ideological conflicts which have arisen amongst Frankfurt hip hop enthusiasts concerning the appropriate linguistic and thematic character of rap music. It is to a more detailed study of these issues that I now turn.

### **'Rappen - in welcher Sprache?': The continuing debate**

In Frankfurt, as with other German cities, an early attempt to develop hip hop beyond its Afro-American context and re-work it as a medium for the expression of local themes and issues came as a number of local rap groups began incorporating German lyrics into their music. On the surface, such a move could be seen as a logical progression for a generation of young hip hoppers for whom German, if not their mother tongue, had become their adopted tongue following many years of living in the country. In switching over from English to German rapping, it could be argued, a new measure of accuracy was made possible between localised social experience and linguistic representation. In reality, however, German rap has been by no means universally accepted by hip hop enthusiasts in Frankfurt. Indeed, the mixed response to German rap in the city is in many respects deeply indicative of the conflicting notions of identity which have become inscribed in the local Frankfurt hip hop scene. Thus, the negative response to German rap in some quarters serves to prize open the highly complex issues of place and identity as these relate to many young hip hoppers from ethnic minority groups in Frankfurt, while in others it highlights the aesthetic division

which exists between those who advocate an overtly politicised voice for hip hop and those for whom the politics of hip hop are located primarily in its style.

If much has been written about the cultural significance of popular music lyrics, rather less attention has been focussed upon the cultural significance of the language in which they are sung. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that most studies of popular music lyrics have been carried out by English-speaking theorists who have restricted themselves to assessing the impact of English-language pop songs in the English speaking world.<sup>9</sup> Such a trend has had the adverse effect of closing off any consideration of language in pop other than a means of verbal communication. Yet it is plainly evident that language, as it is used in popular music, cannot merely be assessed in terms of the verbal information which it conveys. Rather, the simple fact of language itself can also play a crucial role in informing the ideological positions which become inscribed within conventions of musical taste. One might think, for example, of the nationalistic sentiment encapsulated in the Welsh 'Celtic rock' movement of the seventies when the fact of performing and consuming lyrics written in Welsh became its own *raison d'être* (Wallis and Malm: 1984, pp. 139-143). Similarly, in many former Eastern block countries, English-language popular music became highly fashionable amongst young people, not primarily because the lyrical content of the songs was understood but because of the counter-cultural stance which could be implied through listening to such music. English-language pop, and particularly the 'sound' of English lyrics, being highly symbolic of western culture (Easton: 1989, Pilkington: 1994).

Parallel notions of language as a signifier of ideology can be identified within the Frankfurt hip hop scene. Thus, to return to the issue of German rap, among certain groups of Frankfurt rappers and hip hop enthusiasts who I interviewed it was commonly agreed that only when local rappers began to write and perform texts in the German language did their songs begin to work as an effective form of communication with the audience. Frankfurt rap group United Energy gave me the following account of their own move towards rapping in German:

*In the beginning people didn't think that rapping would sound like it should if we tried to do it in German. But then people began to realise that it was too limiting rapping in English, because their knowledge of the language wasn't good enough.*

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Denzin (1969) and Laing (1971).

*So now a lot of rappers have begun to rap in German and it's just better, more effective. Anyway, we're living in Germany, so we should rap in German.*

At the same time, however, German rap has been used in a rather narrowly defined manner by its exponents. As with 'Deutsch-rock', an 80s movement in which German rock groups singing in local dialect parodied characters and customs associated with their home regions, the sound of German rap has come to embody particular social issues. As I will shortly go on to discuss in more depth, German rap fixates almost exclusively upon the plight of the 'Ausländer' youth struggling to be accepted as German in an environment which is at best simply indifferent and at worst acutely hostile to the fact of members of immigrant populations laying claim to the right to citizenship.<sup>10</sup> For some members of ethnic minority groups, however, the mutuality of German rap with the desire to be seen as German has proved to be too much and has resulted in a backlash of hip hop nationalism. This, is particularly so in the case of Frankfurt where the percentage of ethnic minority inhabitants is higher than in most cities. Circle Sound is a small independent rap label, situated in the west of Frankfurt, which specialises in the production and promotion of Turkish rap music. I asked the director of Circle Sound to tell me something about the label and why he had decided to establish it. He gave the following account:

*Well, from a musical point of view we're trying to combine traditional Turkish melodies and rhythms with rap. The kids have been doing it for a while ... you can buy tapes of Turkish music from Turkish stores around the city and they've been experimenting with that music, sampling it, mixing it with other stuff and rapping to it ... We're just trying to build on the Turkish rap thing and provide an outlet for it ... If I'm going to tell you why we're doing it, well, it's pride really. The point about a lot of this German rap is it's all about coloured guys saying look at us, we're like you, we're German. But I don't feel like that, I never have. I'm not German, I'm a Turk and I'm passionately proud of it. I'm a Turkish nationalist, y'know, 'Turkey for the Turks, foreigners out' (mimics the German Fascist salute and laughs).*

Interestingly, if German rap has come to signify the voice of the second-generation immigrant attempting to integrate into German society, then Turkish rap works to

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<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out that German language rap is almost exclusively performed by groups who originate in whole or in part from Germany's ethnic minorities. 'All white' German language rap groups, the most famous example of which is 'Die Fantastischen Vier', have remained conspicuously apolitical in their music.

a broadly opposite effect, the whole Turkish rap movement translating into a singly defiant message aimed at the Turk's white German hosts. While working as a youth worker in Frankfurt, I was invited to sit on the judging panel of a talent competition for local bands in the neighbouring town of Schwalbach. As well as those bands taking part in the competition, a number of other local groups had been booked to provide entertainment between the various heats, including a Turkish rap group. Prior to the group's performance an incident occurred in which some of the young Turkish people who had come specially to see the group began hurling eggs (which had been smuggled into the building) at a white group performing 'Deutsch-rock'. The Deutsch-rock group's performance had to be temporarily interrupted while those responsible for the disruption were removed from the building. When the group returned to the stage their singer attempted to quell the situation by assuring the audience that although the songs performed were in German, their lyrics were not racist and should not be regarded as such. Nevertheless, the Turks remaining in the hall continued to act in a hostile fashion and accused the group of being Nazis. Later, as the Turkish rap group took to the stage, a large cheer went up and those who had come to see them moved onto the dance floor in a symbolic show of defiance regarding the incident which had occurred previously. Although many white Germans in the hall appeared to appreciate the music, few of them ventured onto the dance floor, wary of the nationalistic fervour which was manifesting itself there.

If German and Turkish rap can be said to both embody and elicit specific hip hop sensibilities, then the same could be said for Afro-American rap, as this is understood and responded to by hip hop enthusiasts in Frankfurt. Moreover, if both German and Turkish rap in Frankfurt could be said constitute progressive political sensibilities in that both attempt a form of direct engagement with issues of race in the city, then Afro-American hip hop is rather more conservative in its outlook. Significantly, among those Frankfurt hip hoppers who continue to advocate the Afro-American hip hop style, there is much less of a desire to use hip hop in an overtly political way. Rather, the political qualities of hip hop are seen to reside in the sensibilities of 'style' and 'taste' already established by its Afro-American creators. Thus, there is a strongly endorsed feeling among Afro-American hip hop enthusiasts in Frankfurt that rap music should be left alone, that it should be allowed to speak through its established style. Such a sensibility also extends to the sound of the voice in rap music. Thus, from the point of view of Afro-American hip hop enthusiasts, the sound of an 'Afro-American English' rap lyric is as crucial to the appeal of a particular track as other sonic components such

as the characteristic percussion and bass arrangements employed in rap music. Conversely, the inclusion of a German or other 'foreign' language lyric is viewed simply as an unwelcome intrusion into a genre for whom, according to these listeners, the parameters of sonic acceptance are firmly established. Thus, as one advocate of Afro-American style rap explained out to me: *"I know some English but not the style of English used in Afro-American rap which is very hard to understand. But that's not the point. German is a very harsh sounding language, it doesn't flow like English. German is not a very smooth sounding language at all and so in the context of a rap song it just disturbs you when you hear it"*.

Thus far I have been concerned to demonstrate how the ongoing debate within the local Frankfurt hip hop scene concerning the linguistic character of the rap music produced and consumed in the city in turn exposes a more fundamental division between those who consider rap's authentic function to rest squarely with its use as a form of politicised communication and those for whom rap's authenticity is bound up with a particular notion of hip hop style which orientates around the Afro-American sound and image. Now, while each of these competing *versions* of hip hop culture bespeaks a different form of aesthetic attachment to the genre, at the same time it seems to me that both are locked into distinctive forms of physical and visual experience acquired in Frankfurt's local environment. To put this another way, there would appear to be a direct correspondence between the significance of hip hop as a cultural practise in Frankfurt and the various terrains, both physical and symbolic, of the city itself. Clearly, such a contention serves to add weight to the argument which I presented at the beginning of this chapter, that is, that the issue of hip hop authenticity is in each case a highly subjective and locally specific sensibility. With this in mind I want now to demonstrate more forcibly the impact of physical locality upon notions of hip hop authenticity, again with reference to the competing German and Afro-American hip hop sensibilities already identified within the Frankfurt scene.

### **'Ich habe einen grünen Paß'**

Two thematic issues which appear regularly in German language rap songs concentrate respectively upon the fear and anger instilled in ethnic minority groups by racism and the insecurity experienced by many young members of such groups over issues of nationality. The first theme has in recent years become one of national concern in Germany. Although racism is an acknowledged problem in all parts of the world, in Germany, because of the country's history, it is a particularly

sensitive issue. A point which is often made by German rappers, however, is that white Germans' expressions of solidarity with their black counterparts, for example, in the form of 'Rock gegen Rechts' ('Rock Against Racism')<sup>11</sup> events, are all too often little more than token gestures. Similarly, it is also argued that, at the end of the day, the neo-Facists will not single out people on ideological grounds but will go for the easy targets, those who can be identified by the colour of their skin. This was the theme of Frankfurt rap band Extra Nervig's song 'Gib die Glatzen<sup>12</sup> keine Chance!' ('Stop the neo-Facists!').

"You tell me you're on my side,  
Well your fancy words are fine,  
But you're not kicked to the ground,  
Just because of the way you look"

While there are fewer incidents of racial violence in Frankfurt than in other German cities, although this is on the increase, racism is often experienced in other ways. As I have already pointed out, much of Frankfurt's non-German population is made up of Gastarbeiter (guestworkers) who, as with the Asians and Afro-Caribbeans who emigrated to Britain from the 1950s onwards, were called upon to meet the increasing demand for manual labourers in post-war western Europe. Because many Gastarbeiter have a relatively poor command of the German language and occupy minor positions in the labour market, they are often regarded as second rate citizens, a label which is also ascribed to their children despite the fact that they have been born and educated in Germany, speak the language fluently and often have a skilled trade and, increasingly, a college or university qualification. This problem is, in turn, compounded by the issue of citizenship, which, in contrast to many other countries, is not given automatically to any child who is born in Germany. As a consequence, those people who have acquired German citizenship often find that they are subject to the same sort of stigmatisation as those who have not. The term 'Asylant' or 'Asylbewerber', a person seeking political asylum in Germany and thus stateless, is one which is

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<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive account of the German 'Rock gegen Rechts' movement, see de Cologne (ed.) (1980).

<sup>12</sup> The term 'Glatzen' (plural of 'Glatze') derives from the German adjective 'glatt' which means 'smooth'. 'Glatze' is a slang term often applied to a bald person. In the wake of the neo-Fascist movement in Germany the term has been taken over by the movement's opposers to describe anyone with a skinhead style haircut. This association of skinhead culture with the neo-Fascist movement is, of course, largely inaccurate. In Germany, as in Britain, many skinheads are themselves anti-facists. For a fuller account of this general misunderstanding and the special problems it has caused for skinheads in Germany, see Farin and Seidel-Pielen (1994).

carelessly banded about in youth clubs, cafes and other public places and can be very offensive, especially to those in possession of German citizenship.

Rap group 'Advanced Chemistry's' song 'Fremd im eigenen Land' ('A Foreigner in my own Country'), along with its simple yet effective promotional video, was one of the first rap songs performed in German to underline the severity of this type of misunderstanding and the hurt that it can cause. Performed by three rappers, each holding German citizenship, but with respective origins in Haiti, Ghana and Italy, the song chronicles the struggle of each to be accepted as German and orientates around the phrase "Ich habe einen grünen Paß, mit einem Goldenen Adler drauf", which translates as "I have a green passport, with a golden eagle insignia" or, put more simply, "I'm German and I have a German passport to prove it". In the video each member of the group is questioned about his nationality. On one occasion group member Frederick Hahn is approached by a white German youth who asks, *"where do you come from, are you African or American?"* When Hahn replies that he is German the youth begins to ridicule him and accuses him of lying, only retreating when Hahn produces his passport and sarcastically retorts, *"is this the proof you're looking for?"* In another scene, Hahn's white girlfriend asks if he is *"going home later?"*, as in back to his home country, a question which, Hahn points out, he has been asked many times and finds deeply offensive.

The message which 'Fremd im eigenen Land' and its accompanying video bring over is that racism and racist remarks are encountered in all aspects of everyday life and result as much, for example, from thoughtlessness on the part of partners and friends as from the rhetoric and direct action of racist groups and organisations. Thus, the song not only speaks out to black Germans, but is also intended to alert white Germans to the fact that in a country where ethnic minority groups are so sensitive regarding the issue of nationality, equal sensitivity should be applied when addressing this issue. What follows is a brief translated passage from 'Fremd im eigenen Land'. Although the translation is by my own admission quite loose, it is, nevertheless, sufficient to highlight the original lyric's concern with the encountered problems and experienced anxieties of those people struggling to be accepted as German citizens.

"The problem is one of ideology,  
A real German must have that certain look,

With blue eyes and blond hair,  
 Then everything's okay, no worries,  
 There was another time when it was like this, right? . . .  
 Always the same stupid questions . . .  
 'Are you going home later?'  
 What, to my home in Heidelberg?  
 'No, come on now, you know what I mean!'  
 Look, forget it will you!  
 People have asked me this since I was a child,  
 Yet I was born in this country twenty years ago,"

Since the release of 'Fremd im eigenen Land', a number of German language rappers in Frankfurt have endeavoured to develop its theme and have also used the rap medium to explore a range of similar issues. The resulting work by groups such as United Energy and Extra Nervig has consolidated in the minds of many of those who attend their performances the link between rap as a politicised discourse and the various insecurities experienced by members of certain ethnic minority groups in Frankfurt. Indeed, the personal investment of German language rappers in this localised version of the rap style and their belief that such an approach is the only way in which hip hop can be used as an authentic means of expression is clearly evidenced in the strong opinions which are often voiced against those rap fans who opt for the more mainstream American artists. Thus, for example, speaking about the popularity of US style 'gangsta rap' in Frankfurt, a German language rapper explained to me:

*There are people who don't understand a word of English, but they like the music so they pretend that they understand what they're listening to and I personally have a problem with that. For a lot of people, the commercial side of it, the image and the clothes are more important than the music and I find that ridiculous. They pretend to be 'gangsta' rappers from the USA and yet we've got enough social problems here which need to be addressed.*

It is interesting to note the way in which the word 'pretend' is used in the above account to denote a form of 'playing' or 'acting' out a role, which, according to the interviewee, is how those who favour the Afro-American style of hip hop must inevitably come to understand their aesthetic attachment to the hip hop genre. An interesting analogy between public life and the conventions of theatrical



performance is offered by Chaney (1993). It seems to me that Chaney's conceptualisation of the modern city centre as "a stage for public drama", together with its underlying implication that the modern urban experience, rather than complying with a commonly acknowledged and 'objective' social narrative, comprises a series of competing fictive interpretations, provides a fitting theoretical starting point for a further exploration of the deeply ingrained visions of America which continue to inform much of the hip hop culture acted out in the streets of Frankfurt (p.68). If, on the one hand, Frankfurt's multiple fictions of collective life are sustained by the multicultural composition of the city, then since 1945, the changing face of the city itself has increasingly enhanced the flow of public drama. In particular, US directed post-war redevelopment has brought with it a variety of structures, surfaces and images which have met head on with the increasing flow of popular culture resources from the US to produce an enduring visage of America in Frankfurt.

### **The view from Mainhattan**

During the course of the second world war Frankfurt was heavily bombed by allied aircraft and much of the city centre completely destroyed. After the war reconstruction work was effected in Frankfurt and other German cities with considerable financial assistance from the US government in the form of an ambitious loan package known as the Marshall Plan.<sup>13</sup> While care was taken in certain parts of the city to restore buildings as they had appeared in the pre-war years, in other areas modern high rise constructions (Hochhäuser) replaced bomb damaged eighteenth and nineteenth century German architecture. In the city centre such redevelopment programmes completely revised the appearance of the old business quarters and shopping districts. Indeed, with its futuristic skyline, notably the Bundesbank, a high rise, glass fronted, twin tower design and the more recently erected Messeturm, which bears some resemblance to New York's Empire State Building, Frankfurt city centre has taken on the look and feel of a modern North American city. It is perhaps of little surprise then that this part of Frankfurt has become known locally as 'Mainhattan'. Indeed, when such elements of modern local folklore are read in conjunction with a prolonged absorption in Frankfurt's impressive infrastructure of consumer, leisure and public transport facilities, the city centre increasingly comes to resemble the physical realisation of a prolonged reading of the 'cinematographised' USA which, as Baudrillard (1988) points out, has become the primary way in which non-

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<sup>13</sup> For an account of the Marshall Plan, see Meyer (1969).

Americans experience the USA and thus construct images and ideas concerning the nation, its people and culture.<sup>14</sup>

Such a visage is perhaps most evident in the pedestrianised shopping precinct known as the 'Zeil' and two adjacent open areas, the 'Konstablerwache' and the 'Hauptwache', which are each built over main intersections of the Frankfurt underground system. Over the years these locations have become central meeting places for young people, accommodating skateboarders, breakdancers, buskers, street artists and the like. On either side of the 'Zeil' familiar US icons, such as the Disney Store and MacDonald's, as well as a number of imitation 'US style' fast food outlets, amplify the illusion that this is indeed a scene from a North American city. Similarly, the main entrance to Hertie, a large department store, is bedecked on either side and above with multiple TV screens which provide visitors to the Zeil with a twenty-four hour transmission of MTV America.

In the context of this scenario it is easy to see how a version of hip hop culture grounded in notions of Afro-American style and a form of romanticised association with Afro-American street culture has become as much a part of Frankfurt's convoluted urban narrative as the politicised German language variation of hip hop considered above. Offering as they do, a sonic and visual backdrop of Americana, public spaces such as the Zeil provide a perfect stage for the acting out of a hip hop sensibility which imagines itself to be a part of the Afro-American experience. In this sense, the Zeil becomes simultaneously, to use Chamber's expression, "both a real and an imaginary place" (1992, p.188). Speaking about the popularity of US rap in Frankfurt and attempting to account for this, a local rapper and hip hop DJ who recently established the Infracom record label, which, as was pointed out earlier, has been responsible for the signing of several US rap acts, made a number of observations which add weight to this argument. Thus, he argued:

*The thing about hip hop that people keep forgetting, is that it's not just one definite thing. It's a lot of things, different sounds, different styles, different feelings. You can basically do with it what you want ... A lot of kids here go for the groove and the image. They see the videos, they see the clothes and the 'cool image' and the kids enjoy that, they want to be like that. They're just play acting the whole thing. And you know, Frankfurt is this big international city ... there's lots going on here, movies, gigs. It's got really Americanised y'know.*

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<sup>14</sup> See also Smart (1993b) and Gane (1993).

*There's lots of places to go where you can hang out with your friends on the street, listen to your music real loud . . . just like in the States. English is used a lot here too and even if a lot of the kids don't know it so well they're used to the sound of it and they can pick out key phrases. And that influences tastes in rap music. English (i.e. Afro-American) rap is simply cool, it's in, and you can relate it to what's going on in the street here.*

In the social context of Frankfurt am Main then, collective notions of hip hop and its significance as a mode of youthful expression are governed by a range of differing local social factors which have, in their turn, given rise to a number of distinctive localised variations in the formulation of hip hop authenticity. It follows, therefore, that if notions of hip hop authenticity are intimately bound up with forms of local knowledge and experience, then in the context of other urban and regional locations, with differing social circumstances and conditions, versions of hip hop culture and debates concerning its authentic usage will be based around a rather different range of social and aesthetic criteria. In order to test the validity of this argument more conclusively I want now conduct a further examination of hip hop culture and its attendant notions of musical authenticity as these are realised in the context of a different urban setting, Newcastle upon Tyne.

### **Rappin' on the Tyne**

In terms of both its socio-economic history and ethnic composition, the cultural context of Newcastle on Tyne is markedly different to that of Frankfurt am Main. As should by now be clear from my examination of other music related sensibilities in the city, Newcastle is a predominantly white, working class post-industrial centre. Thus, as was borne out in chapter four, although small Asian and Afro-Caribbean minorities do exist in Newcastle, their influence upon its cultural environment, including the local music and club scene, has been nominal as compared to other British cities with larger ethnic minority populations. This is also true of the small hip hop scene which has grown up around Newcastle, Gateshead and a number of outlying towns and villages, such as Blythe and Cramlington, this scene being dominated by white enthusiasts.

The fact of white British working class youth appropriating Afro-American and other black musical forms is one which has long been addressed by theorists of youth culture and popular music. In keeping with much of the subcultural theory considered in part one, a general supposition of those who have attempted to

account for this phenomenon is that the structural position of white British working class and Afro-American populations is sufficiently similar to allow for Afro-American musics to perform a binary role in which the oppressions experienced by each group are simultaneously addressed. Thus, for example, Chambers has suggested that the “oppositional values” contained in Afro-American music also “symbolise and symptomatise the contradictions and tensions played out in (white) British working class youth” (1976, p.166). Similarly, Jones (1988) has used the basis of this argument to explain white working class youth’s appropriation of Afro-Caribbean musics such as reggae and ska.

Once again, however, the problem with such a form of structuralist argument is that it reduces the relationship between the musical text and its audience to a pre-given and essentialist form of interpretation. Clearly, it is certainly possible to argue that white working class youths, in symbolic recognition of their felt affinity with black ethnic minority groups, may appropriate black music and aspects of black style. At the same time, however, it is also important to acknowledge the actively constructed nature of such a cultural association. In this sense then, the use of black music and style on the part of the white working class youth becomes a particular form of lived sensibility. Moreover, if this line of argument is followed to its logical conclusion, it follows that a number of other actively constructed ideological positions may also be articulated by white working class youth, via their appropriation of black musical forms, in which symbolic associations with the fact of ‘blackness’ itself are considered to be less important. To this must be added the significance of place. It is often taken for granted that white British appropriations of black music and style routinely take place in settings where a prominent black population serves as a continual point of reference for such appropriations.<sup>15</sup> In reality, however, white working class youth’s experimentation with black music and style occurs in a range of differing local contexts and thus against a variety of referential backdrops which may or may not include an established black population.

Certainly, in the case of the North East region, the white appropriation of black music and style takes place without physical reference to a local black population. As such, the point raised above positing the issue of black ‘association’ as something which is actively constructed, and to some extent idealised, by white youth in their appropriation of black music and style, rather than as a structurally

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this is very much the case with Jones’s study, the ethnographic research for which was carried out in mixed-race area of Birmingham. A similar assumption is also evident in the work of Hebdige (1976b, 1979).

determined 'given' of such appropriation, is perhaps more clearly illustrated. Indeed, the consciously articulated nature of black association in the North East region is particularly evident when one considers the competing sensibilities which characterise the local hip hop scene in Newcastle. At the centre of this scene a hardcore of hip hop enthusiasts share the belief that their intimate understanding of hip hop's essential 'blackness' as the key to its relevance for the white working class experience guarantees them a form of aesthetic supremacy over other local white hip hop fans who, according to this group, have no such understanding of the genre and thus no authentic claim to the title 'hip hopper'. Conversely, a number of other local hip hop enthusiasts firmly reject the notion that hip hop can be understood only in terms of its Afro-American context and attempt to rework it as a platform for the expression of issues which relate more directly to the day to day experiences of white working class youth. I want now to consider each of these responses to hip hop in turn. In doing so I hope to illustrate how, as with the various hip hop sensibilities examined in the case of Frankfurt, each of these responses, despite their obvious ideological differences, are intimately bound up with the particularities of local experience.

#### 'You into that 'nigger music' then?

Even white rap is about race; *à la* Living Colour's wailing, bashing exposé of just how lily-white the heavy metal genre is, Caucasian rappers like 3rd Bass and Snow make the basic blackness of hip-hop that much more apparent (Sexton: 1995, p.5).

'Groove' is a tiny independent record shop in the centre of Newcastle which deals exclusively in rap music; more specifically in US rap which is specially imported and, consequently, not readily available in the high street chain stores. The proprietor of 'Groove', a white Newcastle man named Jim, is a devotee of Afro-American rap music and hip hop culture. Having listened to soul music during his teens, he then turned to rap as it became more widely available in this country during the 1980s. According to Jim, hip hop is essentially "*a modern version of soul*". 'Groove' has become something of a meeting point for those who believe, like Jim, that hip hop culture and rap music can only be understood in terms of their Afro-American cultural context. On the surface, the group of local hip hop enthusiasts who frequent 'Groove' appear to correspond unproblematically with the commonly expounded sociological thesis that Afro-American dance music is somehow able to connect with the experiential world of white working class youth

in Britain, thus becoming a normalised and accepted aspect of white working class youth culture. Below is an extract from a discussion which I conducted with Jim and several of the regular visitors to 'Groove' during which I asked them to comment on the issue of *white hip hop*:

A.B.: *There are a lot of white rap fans in Newcastle who are using hip hop to talk about their own experiences.*

Jim: *There's no such thing as white hip hop.*

A.B.: *Why is that?*

Jim: *Because hip hop is a black music. As white people we should still respect it as black music.*

Jeff: *All the time before, white people were into black music, hip hop's just the same. There's a message in black music which translates for white working class people.*

A.B.: *What is that?*

Dave: *It's about being proud of where you come from ...*

Jeff: *Yeah and because it (black music) offers a strength and intelligence which no British culture does.*

Jim: *The trend at the moment is to be real ... to rap in your own accent and talk about things close to you ... don't try to be American like. But that's why British hip hop will always be shite ... I went to New York, well actually to Cleveland near New York and stayed with a black family. It was brilliant, it changed my life. You can't talk about white hip hop, it doesn't exist.*

Clearly then, among the 'Groove' regulars there is a shared sense of belief that the essential blackness of hip hop is also the key to its use by white working class youth as an authentic mode of cultural expression. Interestingly, however, when the wider cultural context of 'Groove' and those who frequent it is studied in more detail, it becomes evident that such a belief in the nature of hip hop carries a level of symbolic importance which goes beyond a shared sense of affinity with the Afro-American experience. Within the local Newcastle music scene, 'Groove' has

a reputation for being one of the few 'specialist' record shops in the city. As such the shop enjoys something of an 'outsider' status. Indeed, as a local hairdresser and popular music enthusiast who is familiar with 'Groove' explained to me one day as I sat in his chair, *"I can't see how he (Jim) makes any money from that business. It's more a labour of love for him really"*.

In many ways, the above observation constitutes a highly sensitive reading of 'Groove' and the type of cultural work which it performs. In the context of Newcastle, 'Groove', although ostensibly a business venture, at the same time plays host to a type of self-styled local hip hop elite in which an intimate understanding of hip hop's black roots is combined with a comprehensive knowledge of rap music and what, on the basis of the group's understanding of the music's cultural significance, counts as good or bad rap. This form of local 'cultural capital', into which the local reputation of 'Groove' is included, is then used as a way of articulating the group's difference from the 'new jacks', a term given to those who are considered to be hip hop 'tourists', that is, who listen indiscriminately to rap music before moving on to a new trend. Thus, as Jim pointed out: *"These new jacks, you can spot them a mile off. They're just into hip hop 'cause it's trendy like. They come in here and they don't know what the fuck they're talking about. They'll buy about one record a month for a year or something and then get into something else, house or something"*.

Marks has suggested that white appropriations of black musical forms are often symbolically transformed into "badge(s) of exclusivity", particularly if such conspicuous displays of black taste on the part of young whites enable them to "manifest their difference from the cultural mainstream" (1990, p.105). Clearly, this observation goes some way towards explaining the shared sensibility of those local hip enthusiasts who frequent 'Groove' and their collective response towards the perceived fickleness of the new jacks' attachment to hip hop. Arguably, however, there is a further reason why these and other like-minded local hip hop enthusiasts are so passionate in their symbolic association with Afro-American culture. Jones has noted in his own Birmingham-based research, how young whites' "displays of affiliation to black culture" resulted on occasion in them becoming "the objects of a 'deflected' form of racism" (1988, p.199). In the social context of Newcastle, perhaps because of the city's predominately white populace, such physical challenges to forms of black association occur more frequently. On one particular evening, I accompanied a group of local white hip hop enthusiasts, several of whom were regular customers at 'Groove', to a bar in

the centre of Newcastle where a weekly 'hip hop' night was being held. On the way to the bar, the group, dressed in typical Afro-American hip hop style clothes, were subject to several shouts of "wigger"<sup>16</sup> and attracted comments, such as "are you going to a fancy dress party?", from other young club and pub-goers who were at large in the city centre. Further accounts of the deflected racism encountered by this group of hip hop enthusiasts were often forthcoming in interviews. Thus, for example, as one member of the group explained: *"I used to work in a record shop and I'd always be getting loads of shit from the customers ... they'd say 'what do you like this nigger music for?' Or, 'you only like this music 'cause it's black!'".* Similarly, another member of the group, who was a keen breakdancer, related the following story:

*We were always different like ... 'cause we always used to go in the park and that and you'd get these idiots comin' up and saying 'what yoos doin' there, that breakdancin'?' ... and they'd do us in ... And we used to go to nightclubs and that and the DJ was one of our mates. He'd clear the floor and say 'right we're havin' some breakdancers up now, some really hardcore hip hoppers', and they'd all start spittin' on us.*

The result of such displays of hostility to the group was that its members became even more forthright in terms of their 'black association', this symbol of 'exclusivity' being turned around and worn with an air of defiance in the face of a crowd whose racism, it was argued, went hand in hand with its small-mindedness and conservative tastes in music and fashion. Thus, as one of the group exclaimed: *"I fucking hate the town scene, all that crap commercial music and fashion stuff. As far as I'm concerned it has nothing to do with my life whatsoever".* Within the group then, there was a carefully fashioned sensibility which dictated that in being frank about their dedication, not only to Afro-American hip hop, but to the stylistic and ideological forms of address they deemed to be a part of it, they were, in turn, revealing an honesty and integrity within themselves, thus setting the group apart from the small town mentality which was deemed to prevail in Newcastle. Indeed, one could go as far as to argue that for this particular group of hip hoppers, their staunchly adhered to hip hop identity had become a form of external faith, the latter being reconfirmed each time the group was subject to abuse by 'non-believers'. As such, incidents of abuse had become not so much insulting

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<sup>16</sup> 'Wigger' is a term meaning 'white nigger' which is often applied to young whites who are deemed by other white youths to be associating 'too closely' with black culture.



experiences or tests of patience, but rather provided the group with a platform for displays of collective martyrdom to their cause.

This type of cultural response to hip hop is considerably at odds with the notion that Afro-American musical forms routinely acquire a basis of appeal among white British working class audiences due to the structural proximity of latter to Afro-Americans. In this particular instance, the form of 'black association' articulated through the consumption of hip hop is clearly the consciously constructed lifestyle sensibility of a small minority, who then proceed to use this sensibility as a way of marking themselves out from other sections of Newcastle youth.

A somewhat different, if equally *fashioned*, lifestyle sensibility can be seen in relation to those individuals who make up what could be classed as Newcastle's *white* hip hop fraternity. As I pointed out earlier, for these local enthusiasts, hip hop's use as an authentic mode of expression is not restricted to the form of felt association with the Afro-American experience shared by those individuals who frequent 'Groove'. Rather, there is a commonly held view among *white* hip hop enthusiasts that the essence of hip hop culture relates to its easy translation into a medium which directly bespeaks the white British working class experience. Thus as one self-styled 'Geordie' rapper explained to me:

*Hip hop isn't a black thing, it's a street thing y'know, where people get so pissed off with their environment that they have to do something about it. And the way to do it and get the word to the people is to do it creatively, be it writing on a wall or expressing it in a rap ... or wearing baggy clothes y'know. It's all part of this one thing of going 'oh look man, we've had enough of this and we're gonna change it in our way'.*

Clearly then, in a similar fashion to the German-language rappers and rap fans considered in the first part of this chapter, *white* hip hop enthusiasts in Newcastle are attempting to rework the hip hop genre so that it becomes a form of address which resonates intimately with the nature of their own particular local circumstances. In the following pages I want to consider two specific examples of the way in which hip hop has been taken up by white working class youth in Newcastle as a way of addressing issues encountered on a day to day basis in the city. In both cases, hip hop is being used as a playful if pointed form of commentary upon characteristic aspects of the Geordie identity.

**“Am that dreadlock hippy bastard that comes from the toon’**

This chapter begins with an extract from ‘Aa dee it coz aa can’ (‘I do it because I can’) by Ferank, a Newcastle poet and rapper. Originally written as a poem, ‘Aa dee it coz aa can’ was later set to music and recorded as rap by Ferank, who also delivered an impromptu recital his work on the Channel Four’s live coverage of the Glastonbury music festival in June 1994. As with much of Ferank’s work, this rap deals directly with his own experiences of living in Newcastle and is performed in a local Geordie accent, a feature which Ferank feels adds an important element of authenticity to his style. Thus, he argues: *“I’m not American, so it’s pointless for me to do a rap in an American accent . . . Anyway, the Geordie accent that myself and other rappers up here are using is a dialect, just like patois, and so it should be used.”* ‘Aa dee it coz aa can’ works at a number of different levels, often intertwining a blatant criticism of the Geordie identity with a simultaneous affection for Newcastle and its people. A particularly prominent theme of the rap is the dogged conservatism which the writer associates with the local populace in Newcastle. According to Ferank, in addition to making the city an often unpleasant place in which to live, such conservatism has also resulted in a stereotypical image of Geordie life which is now internationally recognised. Thus, as he observes in ‘Aa dee it coz aa can’:

“The whole world thinks that wa aal just slobs,  
Wi’ heeds fulla shite an footballs for brains,  
Wuv aal gorra wake up an think what wa deein,”

As such, ‘Aa dee it coz aa can’ constitutes an impassioned request to the population of Newcastle to look inward upon itself and take collective stock of the image which, according to Ferank, it is often seen to present. At the same time, however, the rap is also intended to deliver a firm message to those living in other regions, both in Britain and abroad, whose impressions of Newcastle are dominated by the notion of the typical Geordie stereotype. Using his own starkly profiled local identity as a springboard, Ferank attempts to demonstrate, through the medium of his informed reading and poetical summary of the local situation, that the stereotypical image of the Geordie character is erroneous; that popular icons of Geordie life such as beer and football, while they may play a large role in the local scheme of things, are tempered by other forms of local sensibility in

which a critical reflection on the nature of life in Newcastle is paramount. Thus, as Ferank explained to me:

*I was tryin' to change people's perceptions of what they think o' Geordies. Flat caps and this Geordie pride thing which I don't feel. Eh, I'm proud o' where I come from and of the people that I care for and who care for me. But eh, there's a lot of malice in this town and a lotta people who need an education. And I'd like to think that I've had one of sorts, and I've always been from here. So it was kinda sayin' 'oh look man for fuck's sake, I might be from here but I'm not your typical Geordie!'. While I am ... while I should be accepted as the most typical Geordie.*

In a further twist of meaning, 'Aa dee it coz aa can' is also intended to point an accusing finger at those who, according to Ferank, have habitually ridiculed and, on occasion, physically mistreated him and other people who are deemed not to 'fit in'. If the people of Newcastle are seen to be conservative, then this, argues Ferank, is manifested most readily when they are confronted with someone who fails to conform with accepted conventions of appearance such as dress and hairstyle. Moreover, it is Ferank's opinion that such conservatism is destined to remain a part of the city's character for a long time to come as, from a very early age, children are indoctrinated by their parents into believing that those who are in some way 'individual' or 'eccentric' in their appearance or manner are misfits and should therefore be subject to a form of systematic stigmatisation. Again, as Ferank himself explained to me:

*... when I'm out in the street I'll get someone pass a comment on how I look, within earshot of myself and they don't mind if I hear. Y'know ... and that's their attitude to everything here ... Like I'll walk past kids in the street and they'll be with their parents and that and even the parents'll join in wi' like 'look at the state o' him, they look like bloody rats' tails in 'is hair'. Y'know, they're really blatant about it ... These people need an education. You can't get away with that, you gotta expect a reaction. And they normally get one from me ... They get it in a rhyme, they're there y'know. And maybe they'll see themselves and go 'oh hang on a sec ... I need to think a little differently about what I'm sayin'.*

For his own part, Ferank combines a dreadlock hairstyle with a broadly eclectic if eccentric dress sense in which brightly coloured garments are often combined to dazzling effect. Thus, as he explains: "I love to dress up myself, I always have. So amongst my mates it's like, 'whoa fuckin' hell, look what Ferank's got on!'. In his rap,

Ferank contrasts the playfulness implied in his own chosen image with the harsh reactions which this image often elicits and makes it pointedly clear that, whatever others may think of him, he is determined to stand by his right to be an individual.

“It shouldn’t really matter that me skeets are aal tatty,  
 An a wear funny clothes wi’ me dreads aal natty,  
 ‘Coz underneath am just like yeez,  
 Or have aa just managed to outrun the disease . . .  
 An me eyes just sing the sad, sad song,  
 Of the hatred the parents install (sic) in tha young . . .  
 . . . aal never shaddap an aal never siddeon,  
 ‘Am that dreadlock hippy (sic) bastard that comes  
 from the toon”.

The work of Ferank illustrates one of the ways in which hip hop is being modified by white working class youth in Newcastle so that it becomes a more localised and, in Ferank’s case, highly personalised mode of expression. Indeed, it is clear from the accounts which Ferank gives of the meanings underlying his poetry and rap that his personal attachment to the hip hop genre results directly from the artistic licence which it grants him. Through the medium of hip hop Ferank is able to publicly voice feelings and opinions which would otherwise find little scope for expression. In this sense, a further similarity can be seen between the *white* hip hop fraternity of Newcastle and the German-language rappers of Frankfurt in that both of them consider hip hop’s value as an authentic mode of expression to be primarily rooted in the power which it gives them as individuals to comment upon the nature of their own day to day experiences. This form of attachment to hip hop is further illustrated below where a second ‘Geordie’ adaptation of the hip hop sensibility is considered.

### The ‘Broon Ale’ ward

Ferank is often to be heard performing his raps at a bar known as ‘Mad Mack’s’, one of the few venues in Newcastle which provides an opportunity for local rappers to air their skill in a live situation. While much of Ferank’s work is composed beforehand, many of the rappers who frequent ‘Mad Mack’s’ engage in

a form of rapping known as 'freestyle'. Basically, this involves taking a particular theme and verbally improvising a series of ideas and points of view around the chosen theme. This form of rapping has also become a primary way in which local *white* rappers address issues which are particular to Newcastle and its people. Indeed, in many ways, 'freestyling' provides a more effective form of local address than written rap as it enables the rapper to engage in a relatively spontaneous form of discourse. Thus, snippets of local 'street' gossip and more widely acknowledged local themes and issues can be verbally woven together with pieces of local urban folklore to produce particularly pointed, hard-hitting and, on occasion, humorous cameos of local social life. The following account is drawn from a conversation with a member of a particular group of freestyle rappers who regularly perform at 'Mad Mack's':

*We used to use a lot of 'Americanisms' in our raps, but then when we started comin' down here we heard pure Geordie rap. Like with Ferank . . . it was just like 'oh yeah check out Ferank's flow'. And then people'd be sayin' to us 'why don't you do a rap theme about like eh, like an American rap crew would do a song about Crack and about how it's affecting their city an' that?' An' we started thinkin' 'well aye why not, lets 'ave a go at doin' something about Newcastle Brown Ale' because there's lots of 'isms' for Newcastle Brown Ale. 'The Dog', 'Geordie into space', all these different names and it's . . . y'know all these different reputations it's got. They used to have a ward up at the General (hospital) which was the 'Broon Ale' ward. So we thought, 'yeah, that's the stuff we should be rappin' about'. It's like our version of 'Crack on the streets' with a bit a' humour in there an' all y'know.*

In the above account there is a further illustration of how hip hop, having been originally understood in terms of its Afro-American context, has subsequently been reworked as a form of address for a more localised set of issues. Moreover, the interviewee implies that by beginning to rap in the Geordie dialect and changing the focus of their rapping from a more or less straightforward imitation of Afro-American themes to a critical appraisal of the typical social issues and sensibilities encountered in their own locality, he and his colleagues have acquired a more natural and 'authentic' stance.

In 'Mad Mack's' this notion that such 'home grown' rap is somehow more in touch with the daily life experiences of Newcastle youth is further evidenced by the particular type of listening sensibility which it appears to invoke. When the

'freestylers' take to the floor, usually towards the end of the evening, the audience, who have up to that point been lazily dancing to a mix of mainly US rap sounds, stop dancing and gather around the performers to listen to their raps. In doing so they are acknowledging the fact that the improvised stories which these local rappers are relating work out of a shared stock of local knowledges and experiences which are in many ways uniquely relevant to Newcastle and the surrounding area. In listening to the 'freestylers', regulars at Mad Mack's are receiving accounts of their *own* lives depicted via a form of quickfire verbal reference to locations and events, names and faces with which they are all intimately familiar. Again, this instance of local hip hop activity is indicative of the close links which prefigure collective notions of authenticity, identity and local experience in hip hop. When the Geordie rappers take to the floor, there is an obvious shift in the audience's response. From the point of view of the audience, the music ceases to provide purely a rhythm for dancing or a background noise over which to talk and becomes something to be listened to, something which actively involves them. In drawing around the stage to listen to the work of the Geordie rappers these young people are collectively endorsing the more locally relevant focus of the work's message and thus celebrating its particularised 'authenticity' for them.

### Hip hop 'authenticity' as a local construct

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate how notions of hip hop authenticity are in each case a product of locality, that is to say, the particular local circumstances in which musical tastes are acquired and subsequently used as collective forms of expression. Focussing upon examples of two different local hip hop scenes and drawing upon the results of empirical data collected from individuals within these scenes, I have attempted to illustrate how, in each instance, the particular version, or versions, of hip hop culture created, together with attendant debates as to which groups are *authentically* portraying the hip hop sensibility, are underpinned by a stock of distinctive local knowledges.

In both of the examples of local hip hop culture examined here, the particular characteristics of the wider social context have greatly influenced the manner in which enthusiasts have framed their association with the hip hop genre. In the case of Frankfurt am Main, hip hop meanings and authenticities are conflated with two distinct forms of local social knowledge. Thus, for many, hip hop in the city is synonymous with the images of the USA which have pervaded in Frankfurt

since the beginning of the post-war period. Such images have been generated both by the continuing presence of US Army personnel and their influence upon the local infrastructure of leisure provision as well as by physical changes in the post-war appearance of the city itself. At the same time, however, the disenchanted youth of the local 'Gastarbeiter' population have seized upon hip hop as a way of attempting to come to terms with the acute contradictions of their dubious social status in German society. As such, local hip hop enthusiasts have become staunchly divided in terms of their personal attachment to hip hop and their particular reading of hip hop authenticity; competing versions of hip hop authenticity being read respectively in terms of the genre's stylistic linkage with the USA and, in particular, Afro-American identity, and the potential existing within hip hop to stage a form of political protest against the incidence of racial discrimination and the perceived injustices of German immigration and citizenship policy.

Within the Newcastle hip hop scene a rather different range of locally circumscribed social sensibilities pertain. Consequently, despite reference to a broadly similar array of musical and stylistic resources to those drawn upon by Frankfurt hip hop enthusiasts, within the Newcastle scene notions of hip hop authenticity have been fashioned around characteristically different criteria. By the same token, however, notwithstanding the essential commonality of class background and ethnicity of Newcastle hip hoppers, the notions of hip hop authenticity which they have constructed are equally as varied as those observed in the case of the Frankfurt scene. Thus, on the one hand, a particular group of local hip hop enthusiasts share in a sense of felt similarity between their own white working class identity and the Afro-American experience, this feeling, or rather the group's articulation of it, being the key to their use of hip hop as an authentic means of collective expression.

This shared belief that theirs is the quintessential understanding of hip hop's relevance for the experiences of white working class youth is manifested in the form of self-styled hip hop elitism in which the group engages. In the absence of an established black population in Newcastle this group, by virtue of its comprehensive knowledge of Afro-American rap music and hip hop culture aspires to become the symbolic embodiment of the *black* hip hop sensibility in the city. Having appropriated this role for itself the group then articulates its felt sense of cultural superiority by ridiculing the 'new jacks' and *white* hip hop fraternity while at the same time articulating its felt sense of blackness in a symbolic air of

defiance against the perceived racism and small-mindedness of the 'town crowd'. At the same time, however, the lack of a substantial black presence in Newcastle has also facilitated the staging of an altogether different white working class response to hip hop in which other local hip hop enthusiasts, not content with forming a romantic association with the Afro-American experience, have advocated a more progressive role for the genre. Thus, these individuals have constructed their own notion of hip hop authenticity in which a form of address which deals more directly with the day to day experiences of the white working class 'Geordie' youth is a grounding characteristic.

Arguably then, when addressing the issue of hip hop authenticity it is important not to overlook the fact that the definition of such authenticity is inextricably bound up with the particular local circumstances in which hip hop is heard and collectively used by different groups of hip hop enthusiasts. As the empirical accounts presented in this chapter have sought to demonstrate, it is impractical to assume, as other theorists of popular music have done, that the nature of hip hop authenticity can be arrived at via the construction of an abstract, essentialist argument which can then be applied unproblematically to every instance of hip hop consumption. In each case, hip hop authenticity is the product of a particular meeting between the sensibilities contained within the hip hop genre and the distinctive local sensibilities already possessed by those who choose to appropriate the genre. If the music, images, and basic sensibilities of style contained within the hip hop genre, as this is marketed to consumers throughout the world, provide young people with a series of templates for social action, then the ways in which such templates are fleshed out depends very much upon the particular meanings and significance which these young people themselves attach to hip hop. As I have attempted to show here, such meanings and significance are, in every instance, generated by particular forms of local knowledge and experience.

In course of this chapter, while continuing to pursue an empirical investigation of the relationship between popular music, youth and locality, I have at the same time shifted the focus of my enquiry slightly. Thus, in addition to looking at localised patterns of music consumption relating to recorded product, I have also begun to make some reference to how the local production of live music can also serve to articulate notions of locality and local identity. If 'recorded' musical texts can be reworked by audiences to act as powerful statements of regional place and identity, then local 'live' music scenes and the musicians who participate in them can also play a crucial role in the communicating such themes and issues to local audiences.



In the next and final fieldwork chapter of this study, I want to consider more fully the part played by the production and consumption of local live music in informing images of locality and local identity.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Local live music, sociality and the politics of musical taste: The case of a young North East Pink Floyd ‘tribute’ band and its audience**

In focussing upon the forms of relationship which exist between youth, musical taste and local knowledge I have up to this point made only a limited attempt to examine the ways in which local audiences appropriate and rework ‘live’ music, that is, music produced and consumed in the context of a live performance. Although some reference to live music has been made, this has been secondary to a discussion of music as an electronically reproduced medium. Such emphasis is to some extent inevitable in a study which focusses primarily upon forms of contemporary computer-generated dance music, the latter becoming increasingly less reliant upon the need for “spectacle, gaze and identification” (Melechi: 1993, p.37). The point remains, however, that local live music, as performed by local amateur and semi-professional musicians, can also play a significant role in determining the ways in which audiences appropriate and subsequently relate to given musical texts. Indeed, it follows that if, as this study attempts to illustrate, individuals’ responses to specific musical styles constitute in part a form of dialogue with the particularities of locality, then ‘local’ musicians, as members of particular communities, also engage in such dialogues. As such, local live music performances add a further dimension to our understanding of the way in which musical meanings, rather than deriving rigidly from musical texts themselves, are produced via an intermeshing of such texts with particular local knowledges and sensibilities.

In this final fieldwork chapter of my study I want, therefore, to redress the imbalance of the earlier chapters by focussing attention upon the local production and consumption of ‘live’ music. The focus of this chapter is the ‘Benwell Floyd’, a young Pink Floyd ‘tribute’ band from the working class district of Benwell in west Newcastle. Much of the analysis which I present here is based upon interviews conducted with the band and members of its audience, together with other observations and insights gleaned while attending Benwell Floyd performances. The following pages reveal a socio-musical world in which the forms of significance attached to Pink Floyd’s progressive rock style<sup>1</sup> are

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Progressive rock’ is the term given to a style of music which emerged during the late sixties and early seventies in which the volume and dramatic stage presentation of rock were combined with the type of “musical virtuosity and technical wizardry” more commonly associated with jazz and

perpetually at odds with the dominant sociological interpretation of the progressive rock genre as an avant-gardist and counter-cultural form whose audience comprises almost exclusively of middle class students.<sup>2</sup> As such, the empirical work presented in this chapter provides further evidence to uphold the critique of essentialist analyses of musical taste which has been central to this study.

Mine is not the only study to have questioned the alleged middle classness of Pink Floyd and other progressive rock music. In January 1989 an article entitled "The Dark Side of the Mersey" appeared in *The Face*. Its author, John McReady drew attention to a curious growth of interest in the music of Pink Floyd and similar bands from the late 60s and early 70s among young male adolescents in Merseyside. According to McReady this phenomenon, which the writer believed to be restricted to the Merseyside area, was a backlash to the judged effeteness of post-punk music. Thus, he argued, as post-punk bands such as the Jam and the Clash "fought and fizzled out (the youth of Liverpool) could make no sense of the grey overcoat uprising that was left behind. Groups like Joy Division, Magazine and the whole Zoo label axis based in Liverpool were ridiculed as 'student crap'" (p.56). Other observers have suggested a somewhat different motivation for this sudden wave of interest in Pink Floyd among working class youth. While conducting the preliminary fieldwork for this study I interviewed a Durham youth worker who explained to me that, on entering the profession, he had initially been surprised to discover how many young people in the Durham area listened to Pink Floyd music. When I told him about McReady's article and it's treatment of the youthful interest in Pink Floyd music as a Merseyside phenomenon, the youth worker replied by saying "*yes, but it's a North East thing too ... it's actually a drug thing*".<sup>3</sup>

Whilst not wishing to dismiss the findings of McReady's study, nor to dispute the link between the surge of interest among working class youth in the music Pink Floyd and the increasing 'normalisation' of drug use among young people from all classes in the 1990s, it seems to me that the Benwell Floyd's success hinges upon

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classical music (Lull: 1992, p.10). Progressive rock was an essentially 'British' genre - leading exponents being Pink Floyd, Yes, Genesis and Emerson, Lake and Palmer - although there were also several European progressive rock bands, notably Faust, from Germany. In the US, while progressive rock acts have enjoyed considerable commercial success, their appeal has been eclipsed somewhat by 'home grown' bands such as Styx, Boston and Kansas who have successfully tailored the progressive rock sound into shorter, more radio orientated songs (see, for example, Straw, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Willis (1978) and Frith (1983).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of the increasing 'normalisation' of drug use among young people in the 90s, see Measham et al. (1994).

its own set of distinctively localised criteria. Certainly, interviews with members of the band and their audience did reveal a regular use of soft drugs, captured in comments such as *"I'll often go home, 'light-up' and stick a (Pink) Floyd CD on"*. However, such drug-speak rarely entered into conversations relating directly to the Benwell Floyd, these conversations being dominated by a rather different range of themes and issues. Significantly, Benwell Floyd audiences would appear to comprise largely of overlapping kinship and friendship networks (into which members of the band are themselves included). From the point of view of these networks, Benwell Floyd performances provide an important opportunity for sociality. Moreover, those members of the audience who are not included into such networks can often identify with other 'social' aspects of the band's performances, most notably the ways in which the latter are apt to become occasions for the celebration of aspects of regional place and identity. All of this is not to suggest that the music itself plays no part in the appeal of the Benwell Floyd, many members of the group's audience being devotees of Pink Floyd music. This said, however, in the context of a Benwell Floyd performance the politics of musical taste become framed within a series of locally grounded discourses sustained by the various forms of association which exist between band and audience.

I will go on to make a more detailed examination of the Benwell Floyd and the issues which, in my opinion, contribute to the band's local success in due course. In the first instance, however, it is perhaps useful to focus upon the issue of local live music-making itself in order to illustrate more thoroughly how this aspect of musical life, rather than simply involving the passive (re)production and reception of musical texts, contributes in its own ways to the reworking of such texts within the context of particular forms of local social discourse.

### **Local live music making: A neglected aspect of musical life**

As was noted in chapter two, the only studies to have provided an in-depth study of local live music-making are Finnegan's The Hidden Musicians (1989) and Cohen's Rock Culture in Liverpool (1991). The contributions of these studies to the understanding of local live music-making have been duly acknowledged in chapter two and reference will again be made to them here. Significantly, each of these studies is socio-anthropological rather than sociological in nature. In addressing the issue of local live music, sociologists have tended to deal with the term *local* at a largely superficial level. Characteristically, 'local' music scenes, if

mentioned at all by sociologists, are represented as stepping stones utilised by local musicians on their way to full-time professional music-making rather than as “tangible manifestation(s) of music in (their) own right” (Finnegan: 1989, p.235). This approach to dealing with the issue of local live music-making is reflected in the following statement by Frith in which the writer attempts to outline the problems inherent in the respective “communal claims” made by the hippie and punk movements (1983, p.51). Thus, argues Frith:

As local live performers, musicians remain a part of their community, subject to its values and needs, but as recording artists they experience the pressures of the market; they automatically become “rock ‘n’ roll imperialists”, pursuing national and international sales. The recording musicians “community”, in short, is defined by purchasing patterns (ibid.).

Obviously, if taken at face value, Frith’s claims are justified; pop artists cease to become ‘local’ musicians in any real sense of the word in that moment when they are signed to a major record label and enter the world of full-time professional music-making. The essential problem with this type of argument, however, is that it says nothing of real sociological value about the many musicians who never reach this stage in the music-making process. While ‘local’ bands and artists may commonly aspire to commercial success and ‘star’ status, in general terms this is not achieved. It is more often the case that such performers remain tied to their native communities and continue to play to local audiences in local venues.

Again, there arises something of a misunderstanding among sociologists as to the definition of a ‘local’ venue whenever popular music is concerned. In general, the sociological study of ‘local’ popular music venues focuses upon what are, in effect, ‘quasi-local’ concerns as is seen, for example, in Street’s (1993) article on Norwich’s ‘Waterfront’. Thus, according to Street, in addition to meeting the demand in the city for a rock venue which could attract ‘name’ artists such as “Nitzer Ebb, Dumpy’s Rusty Nuts, Labi Siffre and Ozric Tentacles”, the Waterfront was also intended to provide an opportunity “for local bands to perform as support acts” thereby offering them potential exposure to record company talent scouts, management agencies and so on (pp.43, 51). All of this carries with it the implication that, as far as pop performers go, ‘local’ music-making is in effect one step beyond the local in that it feeds into the type of venue networks and performance arrangements which also host more nationally and internationally successful artists. This, however, is to overlook the vast amounts of

popular music performed in local venues which exist outside of such networks, most notably, local pub venues. Indeed despite their abundance, the study of pub venues and their social significance as sites of local music production and consumption has remained intriguingly absent from sociological work on popular music.

### Pub venues and 'local cultures'

In his study of the British folk music scene, MacKinnon suggests that the latter "has moved on from being a conscious attempt to re-create, preserve and rearticulate Britain's vernacular musical heritage, towards being a genre whose central function is to celebrate live, accessible, small-scale music making" (1994, p.66). It seems to me, however, that if MacKinnon's observation denotes a relatively new development within the British folk scene then it simultaneously chimes with a sensibility which has been a mainstay of, what could be termed, the local 'pub rock' scene<sup>4</sup> for many years. Pub venues have long provided outlets for accessible small-scale local music-making and the opportunities for sociality which such occasions facilitate. Indeed, as a primary locus for forms of local social exchange, the pub, perhaps more than any other venue in which music is featured, acts to particularise the processes of musical production and consumption. In the context of the pub venue local musicians and their audiences become highly attuned to the commonality of social experience which bonds them together, this in turn playing a decisive role in framing the politics of performance and reception.

As such, it becomes particularly difficult to square such localised performance and consumption practices with conventional sociological interpretations of local popular music-making. Indeed, if a number of 'local' musicians regard the local pub circuit as a means via which to progress to full-time professional music-making and commercial success there are many more who see it as an end in itself. This became self-evident to me during my own career as a pub musician performing in pub venues around the Humberside area. I would often converse

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'pub rock' was originally coined by music journalists during the early 70s to describe the rhythm and blues based music of London-based pub bands such as Ducks DeLuxe and Kilburn & the Highroads. Such music represented a backlash against the increasingly elitist sensibility of stadium orientated progressive rock bands of the time such as Yes, Genesis and, somewhat ironically in the context of this chapter, Pink Floyd (See Laing: 1985, p.8). Clearly, in adopting this term myself I am using it to refer to a more general tradition of live popular music in pubs throughout Britain and my reference to 'pub rock' should not be confused with its meaning in the context of the London 'pub rock' scene.

with other musicians who frequently expressed a deep enjoyment of working the local pub circuit. Such enjoyment, I was informed, stemmed largely from the rapport which these musicians enjoyed with the audience, the familiar faces which they encountered at the various pub venues in which they performed and the fact that a night's work, which generally involved performing three half an hour 'spots',<sup>5</sup> also allowed time for drinking and socialising with members of the audience. Moreover, this type of performance sensibility was not particular only to older musicians, whose age and family commitments would in any event have blocked aspirations towards stardom and commercial success. On the contrary, I also encountered a number of younger musicians who happily held down day jobs and seemed quite content to derive their musical enjoyment from playing the local pub circuit on an evening and at weekends.

Pub audiences became similarly attached to the informal atmosphere of the pub venue, formulating their own particularised patterns of consumption. Again, such attachment seemed to revolve heavily around the 'social' aspects of musical events, the way in which the music, combined with the consumption of alcohol, generated a relaxed atmosphere in which stories about the days events and particular situations and experiences could be related. Indeed, such informal sharings of information and aspects of local knowledge often resonated with the music being performed in the pub. Songs such as 'You're So Vain' and 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?', in addition to frequently providing fitting musical backdrops for discussions between friends and partners, could also be transformed into 'tongue in cheek' renditions by altering parts of the lyric to fit in with certain local characters or events. Such renditions and the characters, points of gossip and other aspects of day to day life which give rise to them subsequently became inscribed in the meanings of these songs with the effect that each time they were performed in that particular pub venue the same localised associations were elicited. Finnegan, who is to my knowledge the only other writer to have acknowledged the social significance of the local pub venue, makes a point which strongly corresponds with the above observations. Thus, she argues:

Pub audiences at musical performances usually (contain) a core of people who (know) each other or at least (have) the common experience of shared participation in specific forms of music, aware of the unwritten traditions of

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<sup>5</sup> In musical terms a 'spot' refers to the amount of time that an artist is permitted to perform for. A 'spot' is different from a concert in that, whereas the former describes an uninterrupted sequence of live musical performance, the latter suggests that a musical event will be broken into shorter segments of time spread out over the course of an evening.

that pub and usually with the *same* conventions for listening to musical performance (1989, p.232 - my emphasis).

Pub audiences then, like the musicians who play for them, are attracted to the pub venue not merely because of the musical performance itself but because of the occasions for sociality which such performances facilitate. Thus, while it would be incorrect to say that the music performed in pub venues is of secondary importance, nor is it accurate to suggest that the discourse which underpins such performances is a purely musical one. It is rather the case that the appeal of certain styles of music or certain songs, and even in some cases the issue of musical taste itself, becomes bound up with forms of vernacular knowledge shared by musicians and their audiences (I develop this analysis of the local pub venue further in a forthcoming article - see, Bennett: 1997). It is upon the basis of this interpretation of local music-making and consumption, together with the expressed view that the pub venue represents a thus far unexplored but crucially significant site of local music production and consumption, that I now embark upon the main theme of this chapter, a detailed study of the Benwell Floyd and the socio-musical factors which, in my opinion, contribute to the band's local success.

#### **'It's just a cardboard wall!'**

As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the Benwell Floyd are a young Pink Floyd 'tribute' band from west Newcastle. Formed in 1994 and publicising themselves as 'The Benwell Floyd: A celebration of Floyd's classics 1970-1995', the group have achieved considerable local success, playing an average of ten live shows a month in pub venues around the North East, more often than not to capacity audiences. Without a doubt, a major aspect of the band's local appeal rests upon their unquestionable musical ability. This said, however, such appeal is also underpinned by the various social links which exist between the band and its audience. Indeed, the Benwell Floyd's own acknowledgement of these links has, in many ways, become a 'built-in' characteristic of their approach to live performance.

The Benwell Floyd's show of affinity with their audience is perhaps most noticeable in the steps which they take to *personalise* their performances. During the summer of 1995 the group's live show opened with a Pink Floyd medley containing a number of songs from the deeply introspective 1979 Pink Floyd album 'The Wall'; accordingly, the group had constructed a cardboard mini-



version of the 'wall' stage-set which featured in the original Pink Floyd tour to promote the album. In the course of the medley, the Benwell Floyd performed an excerpt from the song 'Another Brick in the Wall Part 1' which contains the line *"All in all it's just another brick in the wall"*, signifying former Pink Floyd vocalist Roger Waters's increasing sense of alienation from, among other things, the audiences at Pink Floyd performances. When Steve, the Benwell Floyd's vocalist, sang this line, he modified the lyric, singing alternatively *"All in all it's just a cardboard wall"*. In doing so he introduced an element of humour into an otherwise deeply serious lyric by drawing attention to the makeshift quality of the stage prop behind the group. At the same time, however, Steve also used the connotations of artificiality associated with the word 'cardboard' to illustrate the Benwell Floyd's sense of distance from the original meaning implied in the song, simultaneously re-affirming the band's affinity with their audience.

In other instances the band rely upon their audience's own knowledge of the Pink Floyd back catalogue as a way of involving them in the show, which again serves to affirm the links between band and audience. During one particular performance at the White Swan, a pub in Newcastle, Steve approached the microphone after a rendition of the lengthy first half of the Pink Floyd song 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond', upon which the following exchange between he and the audience ensued:

Steve: *Thanks very much. That was 'Shine On', as I'm sure you know, and that's from the 'Wish You We're Here' album which came out in eh ... when did it come out?*

Audience: *Nineteen seventy-five.*

Steve: *Aye, seventy-five that's right, bloody hell that's a long time ago. It's a good job yooos lot can remember ... Well we all know why where here, it's 'cause we're mad about Pink Floyd. Right, you can help us again. This one's called 'Fearless'. Which album's that from?*

Audience member: *It's from 'Meddle'.*

Steve: *'Meddle' right. Seventy-two I think?*

Audience member: *No, it's seventy-one.*

Steve: *Aye so it is. Yoos caught us out again. You're obviously on form tonight.*

The notion that progressive rock could be presented in such a localised and highly 'personalised' fashion is entirely at odds with conventional sociological interpretations of the genre which have tended towards the opinion that its musically complex stylistic properties demand a more 'individualised' and, according to some observers, middle class listening sensibility (Willis: 1978, p.156). Clearly, however, the Benwell Floyd serve to challenge such interpretations of progressive rock, effortlessly blending its stylistic protocol with a form of 'in house' rapport which, if anything, might be said to contain echoes of the working class 'concert halls' which played such a significant role in North East culture throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century (Harker: 1981). Similarly, the nature of this type of performance and reception of Pink Floyd music reinforces Pickering and Green's (1987) observation, noted in chapter two, concerning the vernacularisation of musical texts as they are appropriated by musicians and audiences in particular localities.

In many ways, the failure on the part of sociologists to acknowledge the possibility of such shifts in the meaning and significance of 'progressive rock' as it is taken up and used by local performers and audiences is synonymous with the general failing of popular music sociology to engage in any sustained empirical investigation of the social contexts in which musical appropriations occur. At the same time, however, progressive rock's allegedly 'middle class' credentials, ranging from the public school education of the group Genesis, one of the scene's early prime movers, to the often grandiose, Tolkienesque style of its lyrics, has served as something of a 'trump card' in the sociological argument that musical taste is 'determined' by social class position and thus without need of empirical investigation. Notwithstanding the skewed timescale of the equation involved, in the eye of the sociologist, the 'intellectual air' of progressive rock is to middle class taste what the 'no frills' approach of punk is to working class taste.<sup>6</sup> It seems to matter not that working class youth are equally capable of reading and appreciating the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and hanging posters of Roger Dean's artwork on their bedroom walls.<sup>7</sup> Whitley's more recent 'retrospective' study of progressive rock, although also lacking an empirical basis of enquiry, at least acknowledges the

<sup>6</sup> Such a view is clearly evidenced in Hebdige (1979).

<sup>7</sup> Roger Dean was the artist responsible for designing the album covers of progressive rock group Yes throughout much of the 1970s (he also designed several album covers for 70s heavy metal/progressive rock crossover group Uriah Heep). Dean's artwork was so innovative that it quickly became sought after by progressive rock fans. Consequently, many of his paintings and album cover designs became available in poster form.

essentially dynamic and non class-based form of relationship between the music and its audience(s). Thus, she argues:

... there is little to suggest that progressive rock was the exclusive property of the counter-culture. Rather, it seems that there were correspondencies between musical practices and social relationships ... Progressive rock, like all music, relied on communication and positive identification. As such, it had an intrinsically collective character which suggested that it was capable of transmitting the affective identities, attitudes and behavioural patterns of the group(s) identifying with it (1992, pp.4-5).

Whiteley's observations, while they refer primarily to audience receptions of recorded progressive rock music, also provide a useful insight into the quasi 'concert hall' atmosphere which sometimes ensues at Benwell Floyd performances. In the context of a Benwell Floyd performance, the correspondencies which Whiteley notes between musical practices and social relationships are augmented by the mutual affinity of the social actors involved and thus become doubly articulated. In effect, a form of cultural synthesis occurs, intermeshing musical and extra-musical sensibilities, with the effect that the quality of a Benwell Floyd performance is judged not merely upon its musical merits but also by what is known of the musicians up on the stage and the way in which the latter constantly reaffirm their associations with those watching. During one particular conversation with Steve I asked him for his own opinion as to why the Benwell Floyd had become so successful. His comments serve to support the observations just made. Thus, he said:

*Well if you're asking me why we've become so popular, I suppose the short answer to that is that we're liked, not only as a band but as people as well. Wherever we go there's always a core of people there who we know and vice versa. But I also think it's how we're doin' it ... I mean, I like Pink Floyd a lot, but there's this thing you know, you're shelling out a load of money to watch four dots on a stage half a mile away. What we're doing is accessible ... it's there like ... for people to see.*

A similar answer was forthcoming when, on a separate occasion, I put the same question to one of the band's fans:

A.B.: *Why do you think the Benwell Floyd are so popular?*

Fan: *Why? Ha that's easy man, a' can tell you in two sentences. They play Pink Floyd music well, you can't fault them. An' they're a good set o' people an' all.*

As this brief overview begins to reveal, thus corresponding with my earlier evaluation of local live music performed in the pub setting, the nature of a Benwell Floyd performance is such that the production and consumption of Pink Floyd music, while this is certainly an important aspect of the event, is simultaneously commingled with a collective reading of the event's significance as a 'social' occasion. Moreover, if at one level the band themselves encourage a form of sociality through their efforts to involve the audience in their performances, then equally there exist other opportunities for sociality which are staged around the actual performance. During the course of my research on the Benwell Floyd and members of the group's audience, several such forms of what I will call 'extra-musical sociality' became apparent to me. Interestingly, each of these systems of extra-musical sociality appeared to be grounded in its own particular politics of musical taste.

### **'My mum's favourite band!'**

With the exception of Steve, the group's bassist/vocalist and frontman who was a teenager when the 1973 Pink Floyd best-seller 'The Dark Side of the Moon' was released, all the members of the Benwell Floyd are in their late teens or early twenties. The band's line-up, although predominantly male, also includes a female member, Jackie, who plays keyboards.<sup>8</sup> According to her parents, Jackie had never played the keyboard prior to joining the band and mastered the instrument during intensive hours of practise at home and during the band's early rehearsals. Similarly, Julie, the girlfriend of the Benwell Floyd's lead guitarist, has become a proficient lighting engineer through her involvement with the band, while several other friends of the group now act as 'roadies'<sup>9</sup> and instrument technicians. The relatively young age of the band and their entourage combined with the sense of pride experienced by those who are close to them, ensures that whenever the Benwell Floyd perform live, a section of their audience is always there to cheer on sons, daughters, siblings or friends. Thus, as one member of the band explained

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<sup>8</sup> 'Keyboard' is the term given to any piano-like instrument which requires the player to depress a series of keys with the fingers in order to produce music. In its application to popular music the term is more typically used to describe electronic keyboard instruments such as the synthesiser and organ.

<sup>9</sup> 'Roadie' is the short-form term for 'roadcrew member'. When a pop group is touring, the 'roadies' act as a support team, transporting the group's equipment from venue to venue and assembling and dismantling the equipment before and after each performance.

to me: *"As far as mates and family goes, most of them support us ... there's always somebody from the band has someone there ... friend, lover, mother, brother, sister"*. This was echoed by another member of the band who added: *"My mum's the Benwell Floyd's biggest fan. She's been to about five gigs I think"*. And again by Julie who told me: *"My sister's too young but she'd love to come to a gig ... But she's got a poster of the band on her bedroom wall"*.

In the case of those audience members drawn from the group's own kinship and peer group networks, a preference for the music of Pink Floyd is sometimes secondary to the novelty of seeing a relative or friend on the stage. This is not to say that such audience members have no interest in the music itself, but rather that their musical appreciation is acquired according to different criteria than, to adopt a description once used by Steve, the type of *"dyed in the wool Pink Floyd fan who's been to see 'em umpteen times and probably has all their albums at home"*. As I found out while researching the Benwell Floyd and members of their audience, for those with familial or peer group attachments to the band, it was sometimes the case that Pink Floyd was first heard as 'Benwell Floyd' music and thereafter appreciated primarily in relation to the young group's skill in recreating the Pink Floyd sound and the 'local' reputation which they had thus earned. As the girlfriend of one of the band members put it: *"I heard that they were doing this Pink Floyd tribute thing. I'd never heard Pink Floyd before so I went down and listened one day and really liked it. Then I started going to Benwell Floyd gigs"*. In other cases, this sense of pride in the group's achievements had motivated some acquaintances to revise their previous feelings towards Pink Floyd music. Thus, as one friend of the Benwell Floyd explained to me: *"I used to hate Pink Floyd music. Y'know, it was like when it came on I'd leave the room. But when they (the Benwell Floyd) started doin' it, well I mean they do it so well don't they. I really like it now, infact I've got nine of Pink Floyd's albums"*.

At the same time, however, such an 'acquired' liking for the music of Pink Floyd on the part of friends and relatives was also underpinned by the opportunities for 'extra-musical' sociality which Benwell Floyd performances offered. More often than not, for these individuals such performances became social 'gatherings' taking on something of a party atmosphere. As such, Pink Floyd music became synonymous with the notion of a 'good night', musical appreciation becoming intertwined with the other conventions of sociality that often prefigure gatherings at which groups of friends or family members are present. Thus, for example, it was typical for friends and relatives to carry on conversations during performances

in the course of which they would relate pieces of local news and gossip to each other, laugh and joke, discuss other members of their family and/or peer group, arrange future meetings and so on, seemingly oblivious to the music itself. Oblivious, however, they certainly were not as they would occasionally demonstrate by interrupting their conversations and turning to the stage in order to show support for the band, shouting out the name of the band member or members with whom they most strongly identified or, alternatively, making visual gestures such as waving their hands in the air and giving 'thumbs up' signs. Similarly, such groups were inclined on occasion to join in with the most apparently 'sing-along' parts of the group's repertoire, adding in collective shouts or chants of support, such as "*c'mon Robbie!*" (the Benwell Floyd's guitarist) or "*bloody excellent!*".

For many relatives and friends of the Benwell Floyd then, the musical performances of the band, although in themselves highly revered, were often understood in terms of the wider patterns of 'extra-musical' sociality, the collectively construed 'good times', to which they gave rise. The following conversation took place at a pub bar, during my first outing to see a Benwell Floyd performance. My conversation partner was a young man who, as I later learned, was a longstanding friend of the group:

Friend: *What you doin' here like, do you know 'em?*

A.B.: *Know who?*

Friend: *The band like, the Benwell Floyd.*

A.B.: *I do know them, yes.*

Friend: *Bloody great eh! We're you at the Mile End gig, yeah you must a' been eh ...?*

A.B.: *No, I haven't seen them before.*

Friend: *Ah right, it's yer first time is it! It won't be yer last mind, it's always a good night out, a bloody good do. I get down as much as I can like. 'Al see yers later.*

At the same time, however, it became obvious to me that not all friends and relatives of the Benwell Floyd who attended the group's performances interpreted these events in such a way. For some, particularly parents and older siblings of band members, the Benwell Floyd represented the pinnacle of their attempts to musically educate the younger members of their families. During Benwell Floyd performances many people, particularly those who were watching the band for the first time, expressed surprise at the fact that the group, despite their young age, were able to perform Pink Floyd music with such competence. As one female fan in her late twenties put it: *"Apart from the lead singer none of them look much over twenty-one. I mean when 'Dark Side of the Moon' came out most of this lot weren't even born and yet they play it brilliantly. That's an achievement"*. Sometime later I mentioned this comment to the members of the Benwell Floyd and asked them how they had initially become interested in performing Pink Floyd music. One of the band said that he had first *"got into Floyd"* in the spring of 1994 following the release of 'The Division Bell', the first new Pink Floyd studio album in seven years. Another said that he had begun to listen to Pink Floyd music after seeing the film version of 'The Wall' on video.<sup>10</sup> Several band members, however, gave an altogether different account of their introduction to the music of Pink Floyd. Thus, as Pat, the group's drummer explained: *"Floyd have been up that long ... they've been making records since 1967, they're still doing it now ... so there's that wider audience ... I've been brought up with 'em me ... my brother's always loved 'em since being a young lad and I've always liked 'em from being a young lad"*.

As Pink Floyd prepare to join the growing number of veteran popular music artists who can now celebrate over thirty years in the music business, the notion of children inheriting their parents' and older siblings' tastes in popular music is one which is quickly gaining credence among journalists and academics. During the Autumn of 1994, in the wake of Pink Floyd's phenomenally successful Earl's Court appearances, an article in the Guardian observed: "IT ISN'T JUST (sic) the 30-50-somethings who are flocking Floydwards. There's a new generation of listeners in their teens and twenties, who have been brought up to revere the Pink Floyd imprimatur by parents or older siblings".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Cohen's (1991) Liverpool-based ethnographic research revealed that many young people in the city *"listened to the same music as their parents"* (p.19). Moreover, in a separate study

<sup>10</sup> 'Pink Floyd: The Wall' to use the film's official title was released in 1982. Starring former Boomtown Rats singer Bob Geldof in his first acting role, The Wall is a sparsely scripted, visual account of the themes explored on the album of the same name, the latter providing a musical soundtrack throughout the film.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from the article "Wall of Sound" by Adam Sweeting, featured in the Guardian, October 10th 1994.

Cohen and McManus (1990) discovered a whole infra-structure of informal and semi-professional family music-making in Liverpool sustained by similar processes of musical 'inheritance'.

It seems to me, however, that there is a far deeper level at which this type of inter-generational musical inheritance can be understood. Rather than simply involving a straightforward appropriation of the musical taste, such inheritance becomes a form of ongoing dialogue between family members. This can be clearly illustrated in the context of a Benwell Floyd performance. Thus, for those members of the Benwell Floyd whose interest in Pink Floyd music stems from a lifetime's informal musical education received in the family home, the memories of this education accompany them onto the stage. As such, the performance becomes in part a musicalised reminiscence which is also shared in by family members in the audience. What follows is an affirmation of the felt links between the young musicians and their families in 'musical' terms. When the Benwell Floyd perform for their families they are, in part, engaging in a celebration, along with parents and older siblings in the audience, of the musicalised moments which have accumulated over the years and which have made the performance possible. When the band and their families sing the words to certain Pink Floyd songs, they are reliving collectively the memories which, for them, have become woven into the understanding of such songs. Similarly, the performance of certain musical phrases can also elicit collective meanings which, for particular family groups, have become embedded in such phrases. As Steve pointed out to me: *"It's really amazing the number of emotions that you go through on stage. And when you look at the audience, you see it mirrored in a way ... the silence throughout 'Wish You Were Here' ... the singing throughout 'Another Brick in the Wall' ... the crying on 'Us and Them'".*

This example of local music-making and its influence upon family relations also adds a further dimension to the argument raised in chapter one against the variously expounded notion that 'youth' has become a *contested* domain. To briefly reiterate the main tenets of this debate, theorists such as Savage (1990) and Grossberg (1992) have argued that the status of youth is no longer the exclusive property of the young. Thus, it is maintained, successive generations of post-war youth, sustained by a burgeoning 'retro-market', have continued to hold on to their particular *version* of youth culture and what it means to be young. In chapter one, I suggested that the ever-broadening parameters of youth and the 'youth market', rather than causing conflict between such 'competing' versions of youth



culture, offers the possibility for them to exist side by side. As the forms of musicalised interaction considered above serve to demonstrate, however, there is perhaps a further problem with this 'struggle for youth' thesis, that is, its insistence upon continuing to read as 'given' the confrontational nature of popular music. It is as if the only form of relationship possible between popular music and generation is one of conflict, albeit a revised version of this conflict in which the young and the old, once divided by the fact of popular music itself, now battle it out over which forms of music, visual style and attendant ideology can justifiably be termed 'youth culture'.

All of this, however, is to ignore the deeper cultural work which popular music has been involved in during the past fifty years. Thus, as popular music has become an accepted and normalised aspect of daily life for each successive generation since the post-war period, so the possibilities which exist for new generations both to acquire and interpret the social significance of musical tastes have begun to shift. While a ready supply of 'current' trends in music exist for contemporary youth, equally, other musical resources, such as the record collection of a parent or older sibling, may also provide a basis upon which musical taste can be acquired. During a guitar workshop which I gave at Howden<sup>12</sup> Secondary School in 1986, I was initially surprised when two of the young pupils, who I later learned were brothers, asked me if I was able to play 'Brighton Rock', the opening track from the Queen album 'Sheer Heart Attack' released some twelve years before. It was only afterwards when I asked the boys about their seemingly unusual request that I discovered that they regularly listened to music from their father's record collection.

Such methods of acquiring musical tastes are hardly commensurate with the notions of inter-generational conflict proffered by Grossberg and Savage. On the contrary, if musical taste is acquired from a parent then it is more likely that the parent and child will listen to records or attend concerts together rather than use music as a means of engaging in a struggle for the status of youth. Indeed, it could further be argued that as musical tastes are 'handed down' in this way, there simultaneously occurs a displacing of the rigidly defined relationship between age, musical taste and identity which once framed the cultural aura of post-war popular music. Consequently, the hitherto accepted linear discourse between popular music and youth may come to be understood as simply one of a number ways in which tastes in popular music can be acquired and subsequently articulated.

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<sup>12</sup> Howden is a small town in the county of North Humberside where I grew up.

The Benwell Floyd present one such example of this shift in the relationship between age, musical taste and social identity. In the context of a Benwell Floyd performance, musical taste is seen not as a means of articulating generational difference within the family but rather becomes an expression of family unity. The common preference for Pink Floyd music which exists between parents and siblings, combined with a celebration of those moments and occasions in family life during which such musical bonds were formed, becomes paramount to these individuals' understanding of a Benwell Floyd performance. The familial and locally shared character of the Benwell Floyd's appreciation is again indicative of the process of vernacularisation identified by Pickering and Green (1987) as a central aspect of the social reception and use of music. In particular, this aspect of Benwell Floyd performances underlines Pickering and Green's questioning of the essentialist distinction between folk and popular music and their contention that, rather than attempting to maintain the tradition/massification dichotomy which characterises the study of these respective musics, theorists should concern themselves with gaining an understanding of how each of these genres are consumed "and how meanings are made out of (them) in the course of everyday life" (p.34).

Significantly, the sight of older family members singing along to popular music being performed live by their children or younger brothers and sisters is becoming increasingly common place in local pub venues. In addition to the Benwell Floyd I have attended a number of pub gigs both in Newcastle and other areas where the band/audience relationship was essentially similar and where similar forms of exchange occurred. Such forms of musicalised familial interaction, in addition to illustrating a further level of social significance attached to local live music-making, also provide another indication of the ways in which instances of collective participation in musical life, rather than conforming to essentialist sociological frameworks, are in each case unique, localised instances of social expression informed by particularised knowledges and sensibilities. The same case can also be argued for the following example of 'extra-musical sociality' staged around the live performances of the Benwell Floyd.

**'I'm a Stoneski man!'**

Having seen the Benwell Floyd perform live on a number of occasions in Newcastle, I asked the band members about which pub venue they most enjoyed playing. All agreed that by far the best one was located in Consett, a former

steeltown in County Durham. *"It's the place to be (I was informed) you go to play a gig on a Saturday night and it's a weekend job ... There's just some atmosphere there, you know it's going to be a good gig and you know it's going to be parties all night"*. When I enquired as to who organised these parties I was somewhat surprised at the answer I received:

Robbie: *The parties are all done by the old bikers ... thirty year olds upwards. They really know how to party.*

A.B.: *By old bikers?*

Steve: *Aye, there's a lot of bike lads and ex-bike lads up there. A lot of guys who are re-living their teens I suppose it's fair to say.*

I asked Steve if it would be possible to meet some of the members of the Benwell Floyd's so-called *"Consett Crowd"*. I was subsequently introduced to a group of friends who referred to themselves as the 'Stoneskis', and attended a number of Benwell Floyd performances with them. Several interesting features of this particular audience grouping quickly became apparent to me. To begin with, while they were indeed 'bikers' in the sense that many of them owned motorbikes, had long hair and wore customised leather jackets, the Stoneskis' lifestyle and gender composition did not sit easily with conventional sociological interpretations of the biker image and mentality. As was noted in chapter one, the sociological treatment of the biker, as typified in Willis (1978), depicts a male-centred and 'motorbike orientated' subculture. Willis describes the biker scene thus: "The motor-cycle gear looked tough, with its leather studs and denim, and by association with the motor-bike, took over some of the intimidating quality of the machine. Hair was worn long, in a greasy swept-back style, drawing on connotations of the early Elvis image" (p.20). In contrast, however, the Stoneskis for all their 'rocker' credentials were, I discovered, an extremely mild-mannered and amiable group of people who comprised a roughly even number of men and women, some of whom were couples. Moreover, when going out together, the group happily left their motorbikes at home, relying instead upon Jill, a member of the group who had saved up enough money to afford a second-hand mini-bus.

Similarly, the Stoneskis taste in music, as evidenced by their attendance at Benwell Floyd performances, conflicts with Willis's description of the biker as a connoisseur of late fifties and early sixties rock 'n' roll music. As I pointed out in

chapter two, Willis presented his study of the working class ‘motorbike boys’ and their preference for the “strong simple rhythms and conventional chord patterns” of rock ‘n’ roll as a case for the class determined nature of musical taste (*ibid.*, p.65). Clearly then, it would be convenient, in the context of the present study, to simply cite the equally working class Stoneskis as further evidence that musical taste is irreducible to issues of class position but needs to be understood as the product of autonomous choices based upon locally acquired knowledges and sensibilities. Indeed, as we will see in a moment, in keeping with the localised patterns of consumption already considered, the Stoneskis present an equally intriguing empirical snapshot of the ways in musical resources and local knowledges combine to produce particular sensibilities of taste. By the same token, however, it could also be argued the collective lifestyle of groups such as the Stoneskis, calls for a broader ‘historical’ revision of the essential relationship which sociologists have always assumed to exist between motorbike culture and rock ‘n’ roll.

The typical sociological description of the biker as someone whose musical taste extends little beyond artists such as Gene Vincent and Chuck Berry is rendered acutely problematic by virtue of the fact that this particular incarnation of the biker style began to fade during the late 1960s. This period saw the birth of a new brand of music, ‘heavy metal’. Pioneered by British groups such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, but subsequently latched onto by a number of US acts,<sup>13</sup> heavy metal combined the essential earthiness and volume of rock ‘n’ roll with the “technological effect(s) and instrumental virtuosity” associated with the psychedelic bands of the time (Straw: 1983, p.97). The sensibilities of rock ‘n’ roll and psychedelia were further crossed with the production of music-based road movies such as ‘Easy Rider’ (1969) which chronicled the fortunes of two young ‘dropouts’ touring the USA on chopperised<sup>14</sup> motorcycles. Featured in the film was the Steppenwolf song ‘Born To Be Wild’ which went on to become the quintessential biker anthem of the seventies.

It could be argued that the harder progressive rock style developed in the wake of heavy metal, of which the later Pink Floyd is a prime example, was in many ways directly influenced by heavy metal. Certainly a number of heavy metal groups, such as Led Zeppelin and Uriah Heep, were able to crossover into progressive

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Walser (1995).

<sup>14</sup> A ‘chopperised’ motorcycle is one which features high-rise ‘cow horn’ style handlebars and a seat with a backrest which tilts back at an angle allowing the rider to assume a more relaxed posture than is possible on most motorcycles, hence the term ‘easy rider’.

rock, retaining a foothold in each market for much of their careers. Similarly, the fan base for heavy metal and progressive rock was essentially the same audience, comprising largely of hippies and bikers. Indeed, by this time the sixties style 'rocker' version of motorbike culture had all but disappeared and had been replaced by a new type of biker whose endorsement of the hippie lifestyle was unmistakable. The greasy hairstyle of the sixties had been replaced by long flowing hair and concomitant hippie sensibilities such as burning incense and smoking marijuana. Similarly, the new style biker was often to be seen at outdoor weekend festivals which, in the wake of the 1969 Woodstock event, became increasingly popular. At such festivals the dramatic blurring of the boundaries between the various rock genres was strikingly apparent, heavy metal bands, progressive rock artists and long-haired 'blues rockers' such as Taste and Status Quo often sharing the same billing.

It is within the context of this 'new' eclectic rock sensibility that localised groups such as the Stoneskis and indeed the wider biker scene of the North East region need to be understood. The Stoneski lifestyle is one in which the essential tenets of 'motorbike' culture, stories of personal skill in riding and maintaining the motorbike have become inseparable from a form of hippie existence. The Stoneskis place a great deal of emphasis on being together. During the weekends they live an essentially communal life in which the rhythm of the day is entirely restructured using a combination of drugs, alcohol and music. The very first time I met the Stoneskis I was asked back to a specially arranged 'lock-in' at a pub in Consett and invited to stay the night at group member Tucker's house on the condition that, to use his words, *"you don't mind sharing the floor with this lot"*. Such 'lock-ins', I was told, occurred on a regular basis. Indeed it was during one of these late night drinking and 'smoking' sessions that the group had apparently acquired its name. Thus, as Ben, another member of the Stoneskis explained to me: *"We were all sitting around in the pub one night pissed and stoned and Jill got up on the table and sat there cross-legged. An' I said to her 'you look like a Pixie' and she said (puts on slurred voice) 'I'm not a pixie, I'm a Stoneski man'. And that was it, the name's stuck ever since"*. Indeed, the term 'Stoneski' has become an increasingly important marker of group solidarity to the extent that members of the group now wear specially made T-shirts featuring the name together with a self-designed Stoneski logo.

In addition to such visual markers of group identity, the Stoneskis also frequently engage in a process of what could be termed collective 'memory-making'.

Moreover, if the wearing of Stoneski T-shirts is, to some extent at least, intended to draw the attention of others to the group's existence and felt sense of unity, collective memory-making is a rather more intimate celebration of group identity. Such memories are based upon the Stoneskis collective experiences, typically those which relate in some way to the consumption of music. The group regularly undertake long-distance trips to concerts and festivals. Such outings are subsequently 'relived' during informal get-togethers. In relating intricate details of these outings, for example, funny incidents or the antics of a particular group member, to each other, the Stoneskis in turn confirmed their sense of collective identity to each other. Moore has noted the centrality of similar processes in the formulation of a coherent group identity in his empirical study of skinheads in Australia. Thus, he argues:

Stories about events become the subject of memories to be relived and embellished in the future . . . The telling of stories usually occurs in a group context. Several skinheads may be sitting in a pub or at someone's house or flat, drinking. Inevitably, conversation turns to past good nights or good laughs. The history of consociation is invested in these memories (1994, p.142).

The Stoneskis revealed a seemingly inexhaustible penchant for telling stories gathered together from the group's own history of partying, concert-going and general socialising. Such collective memories became a mental catalogue of shared experiences and events, sequences of which were played back each time the group met. Moreover, in much the same way that an album of family photographs is often used as a means of familiarising new friends and acquaintances with the members of that family and the traits and characteristics which distinguish one member from another, so the collective memories which had built up around each particular Stoneski were used by the group as a way of collectively introducing themselves to others. During my first meeting with the Stoneskis I was introduced to each of them via this method of collective story telling as the following extract from that meeting illustrates:

Mae: *That's Jill over there. She just loves to travel. She can't settle down, always wants to be somewhere else. That's right isn't it?*

Jill: *Aye (grins).*

Mae: *It's like, she'll clear off an' you won't see her for days. Do you remember that time Jill, you phones us up an' I said where the 'ell are you this time an' you says I'm in Wales?*

Jill: *Yeah, but it never lasts like, 'cause a' get homesick (laughs).*

Tucker: *Aye that's right she's always gonna come back...*

Mae: *'Cause she just loves us really don't ya like!*

Another collective memory which the Stoneskis particularly enjoyed reliving related to the first time they attended a Benwell Floyd performance and the events which led up to this. The following story was told to me by various members of the Stoneskis, but most graphically by Ben whose account I include here:

*We'd been to see Pink Floyd in Amsterdam and then the following week at Earl's Court. More or less straight after that we found out that the Benwell Floyd were going to play at our local. You can imagine how we reacted ... it was like 'well they'd better be good'. We'd just been to see Pink Floyd like and they'd totally blown us away. Anyway on the night we were all sitting around stony faced thinking 'who are this lot ... they'd better be good or they're for it'. So they started with 'Shine On' and one by one our faces lit up. And then we were all saying 'this is all right'. I mean, we're all crazy about Pink Floyd, so they had to impress us. Since then we've seen 'em develop, and we've got to know them all too. Rob's become a lot more confident on the guitar, he's really going for some of those Gilmour<sup>15</sup> 'licks' now.<sup>16</sup> Mike's a real worrier and a perfectionist and Pat is like so laid back, but a great drummer.*

In charting the Stoneskis' initial and subsequent encounters with the Benwell Floyd in this way, Ben's account not only serves to reconfirm the group's version of these events, constant reconfirmation of the 'facts' being a vital aspect of the collective storytelling in which the group engages, but also supplies an important insight into the Stoneskis' developing relationship with the Benwell Floyd. Thus, the Benwell Floyd are seen to transgress from 'outsiders', infringing upon the Stoneskis' memories of good times had at Pink Floyd concerts, to close friends

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<sup>15</sup> The interviewee is referring to David Gilmour who replaced original Pink Floyd guitarist and vocalist Syd Barratt in 1969.

<sup>16</sup> A 'lick' is the term used to describe a short musical phrase played on a rock instrument, most commonly the electric guitar.

whose performances become themselves the subject of such collective memory-making. I have already mentioned above that the Benwell Floyd particularly enjoyed playing in Consett because of the hospitality offered to them by the Stoneskis. There was something of a received wisdom among members of the band that a gig in Consett was simply the opening feature of a night, or indeed a weekend, of partying. This form of extra-musical sociality, however, also had a reciprocal effect in that, by entering into the Stoneskis' restructured weekend rhythm and taking part in their group activities, the Benwell Floyd offered new ways in which the Stoneskis' memories of good times could be weaved into the collective experience of listening to Pink Floyd music. Thus, for example, as Tucker explained to me:

*When they play in Consett they often come back to ours afterwards for parties ...and always end up stayin' the night. I mean, that's how we spend our weekends. There's always about six people sleeping over at our place. An' sometimes they play for us too ...like last month. We had a barbecue and we got them to come over and play for us. We sorted out a little marquee for them and they played in the garden.*

Moreover, as the bond of friendship between the Stoneskis and the Benwell Floyd became stronger, the Stoneskis were able to devise other ways of both consolidating and displaying their collective sense of identity through their association with the band. On one particular occasion the Benwell Floyd had been booked to play a working men's club in west Newcastle. The band had agreed to perform there as the event was to be in aid of charity. Nevertheless, they were not particularly enthusiastic at the prospect of performing in front of an audience who they knew were more used to playing bingo and listening to the type of 'golden oldie' bands who frequent such clubs. Consequently, the Stoneskis had agreed to go along to the club to cheer the band on and give them some support. On the evening of the performance I arrived at the club to find the Stoneskis standing outside the building having being refused entry on the grounds that they were not members. After some deliberation on the part of Steve with the club's officials, the Stoneskis were eventually allowed in, much to the surprise of the regulars who were obviously unused to their club being visited by men in customised leather jackets and hobnail boots and women with long flowing hair, cheesecloth smocks and beads.

Initially the Stoneskis sat quietly in a corner but as the Benwell Floyd came onto the stage they began to cheer loudly moving into the space left by the regulars



who, in anticipation of the loud volume, had moved back from the stage area. Some of the Stoneskis then began to dance in front of the stage, occasionally climbing onto it and grinning at the members of the band who grinned back, obviously finding all of this very amusing. Other Stoneskis sat cross-legged on the floor gently swaying from side to side in time with the music. Occasionally a Stoneski would pick up a beer mat, tear off the front to reveal the white paper underneath and write down a Pink Floyd request this being subsequently placed on the stage directly in front of Steve. In between songs Steve would survey the requests, attempting to guess who had made each of them. If the group was able to play a request Steve would tell the Stoneskis in advance. Alternatively he would promise to *"get that one sorted out for next time"*.

During the performance *intermission*, a regulation stipulated by the club in order that the club members could play bingo, the Stoneskis became restless and began to call out derogatory remarks. At first these were just mumbled comments such as *"bloody boring this"*. However, the longer the bingo went on, the more vocal the Stoneskis became, eventually resorting to shouts of *"get off"*, *"let's have some more music"* and *"we want the Benwell Floyd back on"*. When the Benwell Floyd did re-appear to perform their second set, there occurred a brief exchange which served to consolidate the bond between the band and their specially imported following. Thus, Steve called out over microphone that Mae, Tucker's wife, should *"get herself on-stage"*. As she did so, Steve produced a bouquet of flowers, announcing to the audience, *"it's their wedding anniversary today an' her old man's asked me to give 'er these flowers 'cause he's too embarrassed"*.

Thus far, I have been concerned to examine several ways in which the Benwell Floyd, as a local live performing group, facilitate forms of sociality which in turn have a considerable bearing upon the meaning and significance which the group's audiences attach to the consumption of Pink Floyd music. One such form of sociality, I have suggested, results from the band's own attempts to involve the audience in the show. I have further suggested that friends and relatives of the Benwell Floyd, who as we have seen regularly make up a large part of the band's audience, engage in what I have called forms of 'extra-musical' sociality' which are staged around the actual musical performance. There is, however, a further sense in which Benwell Floyd performances may be said to imbue the music of Pink Floyd with a strong sense of locally mediated significance, one which relates to the images and sensibilities of regional identity which are traded between band and audience during such performances.

### **A tribute to the North East**

As I pointed out earlier, the Benwell Floyd are a Pink Floyd 'tribute' band. Tribute bands differ from the more commonly found 'cover'<sup>17</sup> bands in that, while the latter will play a variety of songs by other groups and artists, tribute bands generally concentrate purely upon performing the work of one particular group or artist. Indeed, tribute bands will often go to great lengths in order to emulate as many aspects of the chosen band or artist's sound and, in some cases image, as possible. Although the tribute band is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is a trend which is quickly gaining popularity in many parts of the developed world. Other examples of tribute bands include the nationally acclaimed British quartet, the Bootleg Beatles, the Australian Doors and the Frankfurt ACDC tribute band, ABCD. Oakes has suggested that: "Tribute bands aspire to more than just covering a well-known rock band's material, they also try to capture that band's essence, however, elusive and open to interpretation that concept may be" (1995, p.1).

In the case of the Benwell Floyd, however, it seems to me that it is not simply the essence of Pink Floyd and their music which is being celebrated. Rather, the band also capture the essential spirit of the North East in their performances. Certainly, the Benwell Floyd's chosen musical text and their interpretation of it is a major factor in their regional success. At the same time, however, such appeal could also be argued to stem from the band's strong regional sense of place and their decision to articulate this during live performances. Similarly, although the Benwell Floyd, in performing Pink Floyd songs, incorporate associated visual icons such as the 'wall' and 'inflatable pig'<sup>18</sup> imagery into their stage show, they also imbue their performances with a range of visual and oral knowledges and sensibilities which derive directly from the North East region and its culture. These 'tributes' to the North East manifest themselves in a number of ways during Benwell Floyd performances.

To begin with, the Benwell Floyd make no attempt to disguise their Newcastle roots. Steve's on-stage banter between songs is delivered in a thick Geordie accent and makes use of a range of mannerisms and colloquialisms which are

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<sup>17</sup> 'Cover' or 'cover version', to use the full term, describes the art of playing or 'covering' a version of another group or artist's song.

<sup>18</sup> A specially commissioned picture of a large inflatable pig suspended above Battersea power station, near London, was used on the cover of Pink Floyd's 1977 album 'Animals'.

frequently incomprehensible to audience members from outside the North East region, such as myself. On occasion I have sat in the audience completely unable to grasp the meaning of what the band and members of the audience are saying to each other. As I pointed out earlier, in the context of local pub venues, where the majority of Benwell Floyd performances take place, ready-made channels exist for the exchange of such localised forms of address between musicians and their audiences. Moreover, it is not merely local dialect and locally inscribed forms of expression which are exchanged at Benwell Floyd gigs. The intimacy of the pub venue environment, combined with its accepted role as a site for gossip, small talk and camaraderie, facilitates the articulation of a whole stock of local knowledges and sensibilities. This quality of the local pub venue is clearly in evidence each time the Benwell Floyd take to the stage. During performances, the Benwell Floyd and their audience perpetually engage in a form of dialogue - in-jokes, story telling and collectively held statements of fact - which are often uniquely particular to the North East region.

A local theme with which the band and their audience regularly engage is that of the region's two principle football teams, Newcastle United and Sunderland, and the intense rivalry which exists between these teams and those who support them. It should perhaps be pointed out that such rivalry is not merely a masculine sensibility, football in the North East being very much a 'family' game. Indeed, this aspect of local football fandom is often very much in evidence during Benwell Floyd performances. At a recent gig in Peterlee, a small town in County Durham with a strong Sunderland following, Steve, an ardent supporter of Newcastle United, appeared on stage for the Benwell Floyd's second spot wearing a Newcastle United strip. He was immediately greeted with shouts of *"get a life"* by a group of women sitting at the back of the pub. Steve's playful response to this anticipated reaction was succinct: *"What's that you just said, 'get a life'? Just enjoy the music man"*. Immediately a man near the front jumped to his feet and shouted out *"aye your music's great man, no worries. But that top stinks"*. Again, however, the Benwell Floyd were ready with their response. As they moved into the lengthy closing sequence of the Pink Floyd song 'Fearless', Jim, the group's sound engineer, played a tape of crowd noises through the mixing desk. At the end of the song Steve informed the audience that the crowd sounds had been taped during a Newcastle United match at St. James's Park (the team's home ground), adding, *"every time I hear that sound I just close me eyes and imagine the goals goin' in"*. Similarly, after the band had played their final song of the evening, Steve decided to have a final dig at the audience's support for Sunderland. As the

cheers and cries for more began to die out, he grinned, raised his hand and said "good night, thanks for having us and I hope your team does better next year!".

This preoccupation of the band and audience with issues relating to North East football culture is typical of the forms of locally circumscribed meta-dialogue which often augment the musical content of Benwell Floyd performances. As such, each of the group's performances become simultaneously a celebration of musical taste and a celebration of regional place, vernacular and musical discourses becoming seamlessly inter-woven. Similarly, the name of the band itself constitutes a dually articulated cultural statement combining as it does a statement of musical taste with one of regional identity. As I noted earlier, Benwell is a district in west Newcastle from which most of the band originate. Indeed, if the accounts presented in this chapter of Pink Floyd music meshing with North East pub culture are considerably out of step with conventional sociological accounts of progressive rock, then the Benwell Floyd's geographical point of origin is equally problematic for the latter's portraits of progressive rock as the intellectualised pursuit of middle class youth. A heavily depressed area, which has in recent years become the target for a number of urban regeneration schemes, Benwell is rife with theft and drug related crimes. Indeed, among students and other individuals who have moved to Newcastle from regions outside the North East, the band's name has become something of a source for amusement. As the drummer from a Newcastle student-band put it when I asked him if he had heard of the Benwell Floyd: *"The Benwell Floyd! What a bizarre name. I don't like Pink Floyd that much and I definitely don't like Benwell, so I won't be going to see them"*. Nevertheless, the band remain undividedly passionate about this choice of name. Thus, as one of the band members recently explained to me:

*We've had all sorts of comments from outsiders about our name. Now let me think what was the last one. Oh aye I remember now. It was just the other day like. This promoter comes up and says to me 'how are you going to approach management companies and the like with a name like the Benwell Floyd?' An' I turns round an' says to him 'package up an inflatable pig and send it to 'em' (laughs). But seriously, I mean we all live and work in Benwell and we play Pink Floyd music, so to me the name the Benwell Floyd is the obvious bloody choice.*

Again, from the point of view of conventional sociological thought, the scenario just described would seem highly incredulous. Thus, those individuals deemed most likely to listen to Pink Floyd music, that is students, are seen to reject it, the

music being taken up instead by a group of local working class musicians and used in part to stage a celebration of regional and local identity. Again, however, the very fact of such a collective usage of Pink Floyd music points to the considerable gulf between popular music theory and the reality of popular music's relationship to daily life practice, a relationship which cannot be determined by resorting to such deterministic categories as social class but which needs to be understood in each case as the product of a highly particularised merging between musical resources and local knowledges. In this particular case the mixing of musical resources and local knowledges is seen to produce a particular articulation of Geordie pride.

Moreover, such pride on the part of the Benwell Floyd in their home district and the decision to reflect this pride in the name of their band is, in turn, acknowledged by other Benwell residents. Indeed, such an acknowledgement is not restricted only to those residents who attend the Benwell Floyd's performances. It is rather the case that, due to the dissemination of information relating to the band via kinship and friendship networks, the Benwell Floyd and their musical achievements have become an aspect of everyday life in Benwell. While collecting fieldwork material for the ethnographic chapters presented in this study, I spent a considerable amount of time talking to people in west Newcastle. Conversations would frequently include references to the Benwell Floyd. Often it would simply be the case that the interviewee happened to know someone in the band, or was going out, or living together, with a relative of a group member. Nevertheless, this was enough to warrant the interviewee forming a bond with the group.

In many respects, the regional success of the Benwell Floyd provides a vehicle via which those who live in the Benwell district are able to re-invest an element of pride in their neighbourhood. As such the name 'Benwell Floyd' has become a celebrated local icon, while the band members themselves enjoy a form of local star status. Robbie, the group's guitarist once talked to me about how often residents of Benwell came up to him in the street and congratulated him on showing people that something good could come out of Benwell after all. Thus he said: *"It's absolutely amazing who wants to talk to you, people from sixteen to sixty. And big menacing looking blokes who wouldn't normally think about talking to you and you wouldn't want to talk to them"*. It is clear from such accounts that the Benwell Floyd's musicalised celebration of their local identity has, in turn, led to the group itself becoming a form of local 'resource' via which the sections of the population of Benwell are able to symbolically mark themselves out from other

districts and communities within Newcastle. During one particular conversation with Steve, he told me of his admiration for Newcastle United football star Peter Beardsley. It seems to me that a similar, if more loosely understood version of 'local' hero worship can, in turn, be applied to the Benwell Floyd. Thus, as one Benwell resident explained to me:

*What I really like about them (the Benwell Floyd) apart from the fact that they're shit hot on the old Floyd stuff, is that they're not afraid to say where they're comin' from like. I'm really proud on 'em for that like. It's like every time they play live they put the name o' the place around a bit ... an' if people aren't sure about what it means then Steve or one of 'em 'll explain it like. 'An like sometimes you'll be out on the toon or somethin' an' someone'll ask you where you're from, an' when you say Benwell they'll say 'ah right, Benwell Floyd, fuckin' excellent man 'am bang into them'.*

In this chapter I have turned my attention to the issue of local 'live' music-making in an attempt to ascertain how the latter, together with the various forms of mutual affinity which exist or become established between local musicians and their audiences, can contribute a further dimension to our understanding of the way in which musical meanings take on highly particularised, localised inflections. As the case study presented in this chapter has hopefully served to demonstrate, live music events offer local musicians and their audiences the opportunity to engage in particularised forms of sociality in which common kinship and friendship ties give rise to contextually unique instances of musicalised dialogue. Similarly, the commonality of social experience which bonds local musicians and their audiences ensures that local live music events are on each occasion characterised by an interplay of musical and vernacular discourses which are both regionally and situationally specific, such discourses in turn having a direct bearing on the forms of significance which local musicians and their audiences read into particular musical texts. At the same time, the empirical material presented in this chapter, focussing as it does upon a working class appropriation of Pink Floyd music, challenges the hitherto accepted sociological contention that progressive rock music connects only with the consumption sensibilities of middle class youth. As such, this chapter offers further evidence in support of the critique of conventional class and race based accounts of musical taste which I have pursued throughout this study.

## **Conclusion**

### **Towards a new interpretation of the relationship between youth and popular music**

If 'geography matters', and if place is important, this is not only because the character of a particular place is a product of its position to wider forces, but also because that character, in turn, stamps its own imprint on those wider forces (Morley: 1992, p.282).

I began this study by arguing that sociological analyses of the relationship between youth and popular music have thus far failed to provide satisfactory interpretations of this relationship due to their reliance upon inadequate theoretical frameworks. In part one of the study I developed this critique further by considering in depth the central theoretical claims of some of the key sociological texts to have dealt with the issues of youth culture and popular music in the context of post-war modern society. Chapter one was concerned primarily with existing work on youth culture. It was noted in this chapter how the study of youth culture has traditionally been dominated by subcultural theory, a mode of analysis which attempts to combine classical Marxist sociology with the cultural Marxism of Gramsci in an attempt to explain the so-called working class youth 'subcultures', such as the teddy boys, the mods and the rockers, as pockets of 'resistance' towards the alleged disappearance, in the wake of post-war affluence, of traditional working class life. I further illustrated how, despite revisions to the subcultural theory project, such as Hebdige's (1979) foray into semiotics in his study of punk's symbolic irreverence and Redhead et al.'s (1993) incorporation of Baudrillardian postmodernism in order to postulate a politics of 'disappearance' within the British rave scene, this mode of analysis has remained a dominant theoretical starting point for studies of more recent manifestations of collective youth identity.

In the second part of chapter one I offered an extended critique of subcultural theory in which I argued that, by attempting to reduce post-war youth sensibilities of style to a crude articulation of working class resistance, this approach simply glosses over the resonance of such styles, and the forms of identity which became inscribed within them, with the autonomous politics of modern consumerism. I further pointed out that in forcing such considerations out of its conceptual frame of reference, subcultural theory conveniently chooses to ignore regional variations

in the forms of significance which are attached to popular music and attendant sensibilities of style, such variations acutely problematising the structural narrative which subcultural theorists attempt to graft onto the stylistic orientations of post-war youth.

I then went on to posit a new approach to interpreting the relationship between youth and style in the context of post-war modern society. Drawing upon recent theoretical work by Shields (1992) and Chaney (1994, 1996), I suggested that the forms of identity experimentation engaged in by post-war working class youth were better understood as examples of freely chosen consumer 'lifestyles' than extensions of traditional class identities. Thus, I argued, rather than participating in a form of mass symbolic preservation of their working class identity, post-war working class youth were taking advantage of their increased spending power, matched by an increasing availability of fashion and utility commodities, to actively 'create' entirely new forms of identity. In positing such an argument, I did not rule out the possibility that such stylistic innovations could be made to stand for class-based notions of identity, but suggested that such identities needed to be seen as the active decision of the social actor who might just as easily opt to articulate an entirely different range of themes and issues through his/her chosen sensibility of style. I further suggested that collective expressions of youth style, rather than constituting fixed groups à la the CCCS notion of tight coherent subcultures, are temporal gatherings in which individuals, who will also be involved in a range of other 'interest' groups and social relationships, come together for periods of time to celebrate their common interest in and ideological response to a particular musical and/or visual style. As such, I argued that Maffesoli's (1996) concept of *tribus* together with its inherent notion of *sociality*, the latter describing the nature of collective social action in modern societies as temporary and multiple, is a more fitting theoretical framework for understanding the collective stylistic articulations of contemporary youth.

In chapter two I turned my attention to the sociological study of popular music, demonstrating that, while the latter is less concerned with the structural Marxism of subcultural theory, perhaps due to the greater influence of American theorists such as Grossberg and DiMaggio, there is, nevertheless, a parallel tendency to essentialise the meaning of popular music for youth. The sociology of popular music has concentrated upon producing accounts of the music industry's contradictory role as a bastion of capitalism tendering a potentially counter-hegemonic product. While I do not wish to suggest that such an approach is, in



itself problematic, I do take issue with the fact that work which claims to interpret the social significance of popular music has, for the most part, remained purely at the level of theoretical abstraction. Thus, in the same way that subcultural theorists could be said to talk about youth 'in their absence', popular music theorists have been similarly content to construct grand narratives for the explanation of popular music's significance for youth without recourse to those actual lived-out situations in which this music is collectively consumed and utilised.

As I acknowledged in chapter two there has, in recent years, been a turn in popular music studies towards the significance of the 'local'. Generally speaking, however, such studies of 'local' popular music cultures have in reality simply shifted the focus of their enquiry from a global to a national perspective while continuing to concentrate primarily upon constructing theoretical narratives. As a consequence, sociological studies of popular music have tended to provide rather one dimensional accounts of a cultural terrain in which the various locations and nuances of meaning are, I have contested, inherently more complex. Thus, for example, it was noted how in work on hip hop culture, although much has been written about the latter's perceived emancipatory and politicised qualities, such qualities are deemed integral to and thus irremovable from hip hop's Afro-American 'street' context. Similarly, it was demonstrated how in studies of progressive rock there has been an unerring tendency to portray the music exclusively as the intellectualised, counter-cultural vehicle of the middle class student.

In the second part of chapter two, I began to make some attempt to rethink such essentialist sociological readings of popular music. Building upon the notions of 'local variation' and 'lifestyle' which I had previously begun to explore in chapter one, I suggested that, rather than resting on the assumption that the social significance of popular music could be understood in terms of the straightforward 'top down' approach conventionally applied by sociologists, there was a need to consider how audiences themselves made sense of the various cultural resources, that is, songs, images and styles etc., made available to them by the music industry. If such an approach were taken, I argued, it would quickly become evident that the social use of popular music was an acutely complex sphere of modern social life, characterised by a myriad of locally situated musical worlds, in which the cultural messages contained within popular music resources became in each case conflated with particularised local discourses and sensibilities. Rather than simply accepting musical meanings as 'given', I suggested, audiences continually re-work such

meanings in order that they can be used to make sense of local situations and experiences. Thus, in the closing section of chapter two I suggested that, given the influence of the 'local' both in informing sensibilities of musical taste and the forms of meaning which are read into particular musical styles, attempts to discern the social significance of popular music should be directed towards mapping out the cultural terrain of such locally situated musical worlds and the collective youth lifestyles which result from the combining of musical resources with local knowledges and sensibilities.

Having established the theoretical foundations of my argument in chapters one and two, I began the second part of the study by suggesting that, in many ways, the claims of this argument were consistent with the notion of the 'active audience', a term regularly applied in media studies but strikingly absent, for reasons already made clear, in work on popular music audiences. During the course of the next four chapters I examined the posited connection between lifestyle, locality and the 'active audience' in the context of an extended empirical fieldwork project. This was largely centred around the distinctive musical worlds of one British provincial city, Newcastle upon Tyne, with the exception of chapter five which also drew upon the results of empirical work conducted in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. In the remainder of this concluding chapter I want, in the first instance, to summarise the ways in which the findings of my field research serve to reinforce the theoretical premises concerning the relationship between youth and popular music which I developed in part one of this study. I will then go on to offer a new theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between youth and popular music.

### **Lifestyles not subcultures**

Within the fieldwork section, there are several clear accounts of how the use of musical and stylistic resources, rather than according with the translucent, structurally determined action depicted in the subcultural narrative, constitute consciously reflexive and 'localised' responses to a range of issues and circumstances which are intimately understood by the social actors involved. Thus, in chapter three it was demonstrated how the urban dance music scene in Newcastle, although clearly involved in a strategy of resistance, has fashioned this strategy for itself on the basis of a shared belief among local urban dance music enthusiasts that the policy makers and law enforcement agencies in their city work to maintain a club licensing policy which is both archaic and oppressive. Within

the Newcastle urban dance music scene then, nationally established and controversial musical styles such as rave, techno and jungle assume their own particularised political resonance as they become weaved into the collective strategies of those who choose to actively contest the policies which both severely restrict the amount of club space available to urban dance music enthusiasts and also dictate that Newcastle nightlife comes to an abrupt end at 2.30 a.m.. As such, the significance of urban dance music in Newcastle cannot be reduced to the terms of a broad and indiscriminate theory of working class resistance but must rather be understood as a particularised strategy corresponding with the subversive sensibilities of an actively constructed and locally articulated lifestyle orientation.

Indeed, if chapter three begins to illustrate the essentially micro and 'localised' nature of the power struggles which characterise contemporary youth, then at the same time it demonstrates that such struggles cannot be uniformly regarded as class specific. Thus, in the case of the Newcastle urban dance music scene, it is rather the case that a loose affiliation of young people from a range of occupations and class backgrounds, including students, nurses and young local unemployed people, temporarily converge at unofficial dance music events, such as 'house parties', to collectively articulate their opposition to local policy regarding the provision of club space and club licensing. In this sense, the local urban dance music scene corresponds less with the CCCS notion of tight coherent subcultural group, than with the shared but 'temporal' lifestyle orientation posited in Maffesoli's concept of *tribus*.

If, as I have previously stated, subcultural theory continues to provide a dominant point of departure for studies of youth and style then this is exemplified in some of the sociological work on race and ethnicity, where the approach has effectively been 're-invented' in order to explain the musicalised sensibilities of ethnic minority youth groups. Thus, in the case of case of bhangra, the growing popularity of the music among young Asians in Britain has prompted some theorists to speak in terms of a new Asian 'subculture'. This is illustrated, for example, in the work of Gilroy (1993) and Lipsitz (1994) whose respective treatments of bhangra both identify a potentially subcultural quality in the music. Thus, according to such theorists, bhangra performs a dual function for young Asians in Britain in that it both emancipates them from the constraints placed upon them by traditional forms of Asian life and allows them to forge a new form of united ethnic identity in order to counter the racisms of white Britain. In chapter four I contested such subcultural readings of bhangra, suggesting that, as with the

CCCS's treatments of earlier youth styles, upon which both Gilroy and Lipsitz's work are clearly modelled, the cultural responses of young Asians to bhangra cannot be so neatly and abstractly theorised but need to be considered in relation to the local circumstances which prefigure such responses.

Moreover, as chapter four succinctly demonstrates, even at the level of the local, reactions to bhangra music, rather than conforming to a uniform pattern, can be highly differentiated. Clearly, all of this does very little to satisfy the theory that the music is feeding the sensibilities of a nationally grounded Asian youth subculture. Indeed, in the case of young Asians in Newcastle, the weight of local circumstances have ensured a particularly fragmented series of cultural responses to bhangra. To begin with, the relatively scarce occurrence of bhangra events in Newcastle, coupled with the smallness of the local Asian population, ensures that, rather than embracing subcultural sentiments, such events are used by Asians of all ages as a means of celebrating traditional forms of identity. Moreover, if such a form of localised bhangra use may initially seem suggestive of an 'inverted' Asian subculture in Newcastle, or an example of a *residual* form of oppositional culture, then such interpretations are effectively thwarted by the incidence of violent clashes which occur between Asian youth of different religious and cultural backgrounds at bhangra events in Newcastle. Thus, in every respect, the notion that bhangra in Newcastle may function to articulate coherent 'subcultural' values is rendered unworkable by virtue of the complex and contradictory issue of Asian identity itself and the way in which such complexities and contradictions become inscribed within local responses to bhangra music.

Likewise, even the non-traditional responses to bhangra by Asians in Newcastle have little in common with the subcultural interpretations of the genre posited by Gilroy and Lipsitz. This was clearly evidenced in my account of the Newcastle community radio station Kool FM's weekly bhangra feature the 'Bhangra Bandits'. As was illustrated, although the 'Bhangra Bandits' is concerned to take bhangra away from its more traditional context, this has rather less to do with using the music as a means of articulating an alternative form of Asian identity, than with attempting to blend it with other 'commercial' dance forms in an effort to make the bhangra sound more acceptable to white audiences. In doing so, the 'Bhangra Bandits' hopes to act as a musical forum via which to address issues of racism and racial exclusion in Newcastle, with the eventual aim of breaking down some of the barriers which currently exist between the city's Asian and white residents.

Again then, such localised uses of bhangra in Newcastle serve to emphasise the fact that popular music's significance cannot be neatly reduced to the exacting parameters of an essentialist 'subcultural' narrative, but must rather be seen as a highly particularised cultural project within which a number of locally informed lifestyle sensibilities may become inscribed. Moreover, as the study also illustrates, it cannot simply be assumed that such locally formulated musicalised sensibilities will in each case result in a homogenous form of local cultural discourse, such an argument being only a short step away from the repositioning of subcultures as 'local' phenomenon. On the contrary, the local is itself the site of a range of struggles over the right to determine musical meanings and notions of authenticity.

### Global musics, local meanings

In chapter five the complexity which is inherent in the locations of musical meaning was further demonstrated, the empirical work presented in this chapter going beyond the study of what could be termed 'home-grown' British popular musics, and their derived meanings for groups of young people situated in a British city, to make a comparative analysis of how hip hop, the latter having evolved from an Afro-American street form into an aspect of what is popularly termed 'global culture', has been appropriated and re-worked in specific German and British contexts. As was noted at the beginning of chapter five, despite its cultural mobility, hip hop has also been routinely subject to a decidedly essentialist interpretation by theorists of youth and popular music. Thus, on the one hand, the global dimensions of hip hop have been simply ignored by theorists who have chosen instead to explore the cultural significance of hip hop as a distinctly Afro-American phenomenon. On the other hand, hip hop's global status has been understood as culturally relevant only insofar as it allows for a form of politicised dialogue between those established ethnic minority groups and the more recently displaced immigrant communities who collectively make up the African-diaspora. Between them, these interpretations of hip hop have functioned to close off any sustained examination of the genre's cultural significance beyond their designated centres of theoretical enquiry.

Clearly then, the two empirical studies featured in chapter five serve to challenge such theoretically biased accounts of hip hop at a number of levels. Most importantly, both of these studies illustrate that the cultural meaning of hip hop and its significance as an 'authentic' mode of cultural expression, rather than remaining fixed around the genre's use in a given setting, are constantly being

'remade' as hip hop comes into contact with and is appropriated by groups in different socio-geographical settings throughout the world. Indeed, in this sense it could also be argued that chapter five serves to clarify some of the features inherent in the globalisation process itself. Certainly, if the term 'global culture' is quickly becoming an accepted part of contemporary sociological discourse, then its exact implications for the future direction of popular cultural practises around the world remain decidedly unclear. As my own work begins to illustrate, however, if the global flow of cultural resources, images and information is starting to create common frames of 'popular' reference, at the same time it throws into sharp relief the local cultural distinctions which continue to exist between different consumer groups.

Thus, to return to the issue of hip hop, if popular hip hop icons such as the baseball cap, the hooded, loose-fitting sweatshirt and the ghetto blaster, together with 'learned' Afro-American hip hop expressions such as "yo", are universally endorsed by hip hop enthusiasts around the world, then the actual cultural sensibilities which inform collective uses of such icons will in each case be circumscribed by a range of highly particularised local social factors. Moreover, as chapter five also serves to demonstrate, it should not be assumed that such instances of local hip hop cultures will be in any sense ideologically homogenous. On the contrary, the diverse ideological projects, political and otherwise, which can characterise the daily lives of hip hop enthusiasts, even within the same local social setting, may be such that it becomes inherently difficult to speak in terms of a particular 'local' hip hop sensibility. Rather, it is often the case that, even at the local level, hip hop is a sharply contested cultural terrain.

This was clearly evident in both of the empirical studies of local hip hop cultures presented in chapter five. Thus, in Frankfurt, the German setting for my fieldwork, it was noted how the local hip hop scene played host to a number of hip hop sensibilities which, although rooted in common forms of local experience, produced highly conflicting versions of hip hop culture. At one level, notions of hip hop culture in Frankfurt were shown to be informed by the socio-physical influences of the US American culture on the city since the post-war period, an influence which has resulted in a locally grounded belief in the 'authenticity' of the Afro-American hip hop style. Such representations of hip hop, however, are fervently disputed by many young people belonging to the families of Frankfurt's migrant labour force whose collective discontent concerning the racism and racial

exclusion directed against them by the city's white population has lead them to initiate highly politicised German and Turkish-language rap movements.

Similarly, the hip hop scene in Newcastle, although distinguished by an entirely different range of sensibilities and local characteristics, including an all-white membership, was demonstrated to be an equally contested cultural terrain. Thus, on the one hand, a self-styled hip hop elite protest the essential *blackness* of the genre. In doing so, they present themselves as the embodiment of the Afro-American hip hop sensibility, a practice which both gives the group an air of exclusivity whilst simultaneously constituting a form of localised cultural response to Newcastle's essential 'whiteness' and the perceived racist sensibilities of the city's *townie* youth. At the same time, however, an unashamedly white hip hop movement attempts to re-work the genre as a platform for the expression of issues relevant to the daily life of the white working-class Geordie youth. According to this group of hip hop enthusiasts, hip hop's cultural relevance relates not to its blackness but to its status as a street culture. As such, they argue, hip hop functions as a mode of cultural expression for any aggrieved individual or group of individuals irrespective of race or creed.

Thus, while chapter five illustrates the globally mobile nature of hip hop, that is to say, its global significance as a cultural resource for young people around the world, it also demonstrates quite succinctly the highly varied forms of localised meaning which become inscribed in hip hop. This, in turn, has far reaching implications for notions of hip hop 'authenticity'. Rather than remaining, as some theorists maintain, locked into its function as an Afro-American or African-diasporic cultural resource (a function which, it must be argued, will also be crossed by a range of highly localised meanings and sensibilities), hip hop authenticity is in every sense a product of its particular social milieu of use. As with other popular cultural forms, the collective discourses and practices which determine notions of hip hop authenticity, together with the struggles which ensue as to whose particular representation of hip hop culture is *the* authentic representation, are constantly being remade by hip hop enthusiasts throughout the world.

If chapter five challenged the essentialisms of race and ethnicity which have become locked into sociological studies of hip hop's social significance, then chapter six served to challenge parallel sociological assumptions concerning the appeal of progressive 'art' rock. Since the early 1970s, sociological writing on this

musical style has supposed it to be the intellectualised pursuit of an elitist middle class audience. Moreover, such sociological interpretations of progressive rock have persisted, even as the counter-cultural and avant-garde sensibilities of the late sixties, from which the music originally emerged, have faded and surviving progressive rock exponents such as Pink Floyd and Genesis have gone on to become globally acknowledged superstars. Indeed, to some extent, the increasing technological sophistication which has framed the live presentation of progressive rock in the 80s and 90s, together with the genre's emphasis upon musicianship and technical ability, has taken over where the counter-culture left off in serving to sustain the sociological myth relating to the music's essential middle classness. Thus, it is argued, while the intimate 'small club' performance of styles such as punk, combined with the music's essential rawness, resonates with the earthiness of working class sensibilities, the pseudo-classical nature of the progressive rock performance demands a type of detached listening sensibility which can only be supplied by an educated and intellectualised middle class audience.

In chapter six, I attempted to overturn such essentialist sociological perceptions of progressive rock by illustrating that, as with the other forms of popular music examined in this study, the significance of progressive rock cannot be ascertained through theoretical abstraction but will only become apparent via an investigation of its social milieu of use. Indeed, the empirical study which forms the basis of chapter six sharply contradicts much of the existing sociological work which has attempted to explain the social significance of the progressive rock genre. To some extent this is due to the study's emphasis upon examining the role of progressive rock as a local 'live' music in the context of one particular group/audience relationship. Thus, in its account of the Benwell Floyd, a Pink Floyd tribute band from Newcastle, the study revealed a musical world in which progressive rock music was significant not because of its resonance with an alleged middle class elitism, but because of its role in the enunciation of kinship and friendship networks and in propagating sensibilities and urban myths associated with the Geordie identity. That the study highlights the localised responses of a group of working class Geordie musicians and their audience to the music of Pink Floyd is in itself sufficient to illustrate popular music sociology's lack of concern with the real life situations in which progressive rock music is consumed. At the same time, however, this study also functions to expose a more fundamental bias in sociological work on popular music. The Benwell Floyd's low key, if technically accomplished, performances on the local pub and club circuit of the North East region belongs to a particular microcosm of musical production and



consumption practices which, despite its central importance as an aspect of musical life in Britain and other modern social settings, has remained virtually untouched by popular music sociologists. This said, however, chapter six's study also portrays something of the mundane ordinariness of this aspect of musical life, a quality which, it could be argued, has served to make it sociologically 'unattractive' for popular music theorists determined to preserve a sense revolutionary spirit in their portrayals of popular music's social relevance.

In considering the four ethnographic chapters overall, there are perhaps two other points which crucially emerge. The first of these relates back to my contention, raised at the beginning of part two of this study, that studies of the relationship between contemporary youth and popular music are more adequately contextualised using the concept of the active audience than by assuming that popular music texts convey fixed meanings to young consumers. A consistent feature of the ethnographic work presented here has been its illustration of the way in which musical and stylistic meanings are in each case consciously constructed by particular youth groups in ways that fuse commercially 'intended' meanings with highly particularised forms of local discourse.

The second point relates to the issue of gender in studies of contemporary youth. I noted in chapter one how McRobbie and Garber (1976) and McRobbie (1980) have criticised sociological work on youth, and in particular subcultural theory, for its lack of concern with the role and place of girls in youth culture. In attempting to rectify this situation by studying the role of girls, however, McRobbie et al. arrive at the conclusion that contemporary youth culture is indeed very much centred around 'boys games' while girls are restricted to a form of 'home' orientated fan culture which, in turn, prepares them for a future life doing housework, bringing up children and caring for a male partner or husband. While my own work has not focussed extensively upon girls and their relationship to contemporary music and style, nor has it excluded them from consideration. Moreover, in abandoning the subcultural narrative and focussing instead upon the concept of lifestyle, I have moved outside the constraints of McRobbie's critique to reveal a cultural terrain in which girls too are free to choose between musical genres and styles and to evaluate these on their own terms. In each of the ethnographic chapters, I have provided evidence to illustrate that female as well as male consumers utilise musical and stylistic resources. I have further illustrated how the forms of significance derived from such resources by female and male

consumers may be either commonly understood or highly particularised depending upon the local circumstances which frame the reception of these resources.

### Rethinking the relationship between youth and popular music

In overall conclusion then, it seems clear to me that the sociological study of the relationship between youth and popular music needs to be revised in at least two significant ways. Firstly, subcultural theory, which, as I have demonstrated, is wholly inadequate as a means of explaining the stylistic sensibilities of post-war youth, needs to be abandoned in favour of the more liberally disposed notion of 'lifestyles', the latter allowing for the fact that in a consumer orientated society the scope for individual autonomy and creativity in the related spheres of identity and lifestyle orientation overrides the fixity of traditional class-based identities. Furthermore, given that such freely chosen lifestyles may be collectively used by young people in order to articulate forms of hegemonic struggle, such struggles cannot be indiscriminately theorised in accordance with a grand narrative of 'resistance' but rather need to be seen as a series of locally situated and highly particularised forms of social action.

Secondly, given that popular music constitutes one of the primary cultural resources around which contemporary youth construct lifestyles, its role in the articulation of collective struggles, together with the other forms of social significance which it assumes for young people, must also be read in conjunction with an understanding of the specific local knowledges and sensibilities which underpin the social use of popular music. Indeed, any attempt to interpret the social significance of popular music in abstract, that is to say, without recourse to the local circumstances which in each case frame its appropriation and collective use by young people, will only serve to perpetuate the crude essentialism which has, thus far, tended to dominate sociological studies of popular music.

The need to focus upon the local social milieu of popular music use has been repeatedly demonstrated throughout part two of this study. Despite the varied nature of the musical styles investigated and the distinctive types of ideological 'baggage' which many theorists have supposed to become locked into these musics and their social uses, the empirical work presented in part two has consistently shown that the social use of popular music is in every instance informed by highly particularised local knowledges and practices. As such, any attempt to generalise the social significance of popular music beyond the variety of such local structures

of meaning will be both inherently problematic and, more importantly, counter-productive to the task of ascertaining the meaning of popular music for contemporary youth.

How then are we to conceptualise the relationship between youth and popular music in the context of contemporary society? Given, as I have maintained here, that such a relationship is the product of a conflation of *lifestyle choices* with forms of *local knowledge*, how are we to define this in terms of a social process? While I have consistently argued against the imposition of essentialist theoretical arguments on aspects of style and musical choice, some form of theoretical framework is obviously needed for the alternative analytical approach which I am outlining here. If issues of collective musical taste among contemporary youth are not reducible to the types of determinist argument proffered by earlier theorists of youth and popular music, nor are they in any sense of the word random. As with all instances of collective human action, the examples of musical taste examined in this study are clearly operating in accordance with some form of socially organised rational.

In The Long Revolution (1961), Williams introduces the term *structure of feeling* which he uses to describe “a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour” (p.64). According to Williams, a structure of feeling “is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity” (ibid.). It is this notion of a ‘structure of feeling’, together with certain of the characteristics which Williams attributes to it, which, in my opinion, most adequately captures the nature of the social processes that I have been concerned to describe during the course of this study. This said, however, before the theoretical assumptions of Williams’s original project can be applied to my own work, an element of revision is first necessary.

The fundamental problem with Williams’s interpretation of the structure of feeling is that there exists within it little scope for the possibility of collective action and struggle on the part of social actors. Indeed, in the whole of Williams’s account, there is only one brief, and decidedly vague, acknowledgement of the role played by human action, this being his admission that the structure of feeling is “not ... possessed in the same way by (all) individuals” (ibid., p.65). The latter observation remains, however, unsubstantiated by Williams. For the most part, he

implies that the structure of feeling is simply 'out there', that is to say, a 'given' and universal frame of reference for all social actors. Clearly, however, such an interpretation becomes acutely problematic in a social world where, as this study has consistently argued, individuals reflexively use aspects of material culture, such as popular music and style, as a means of constructing and marking out distinctive forms of social identity for themselves. Indeed, as Jenks notes, in William's analysis of culture, within which the term 'structure of feeling' is used as a central interpretative model, there occurs

... a decontextualizing of culture through a somewhat idealistic hermeneutic. Culture is not special, it is mundane and part of everybody's life; it is also conceived as of as a project, as change, as part of a proper and necessary human evolution and yet there is an essentialism in his work ... (which) tends to depoliticize the very idea of culture (1993, pp.93-94).

Obviously then, if Williams's concept is to be of use here, it must first be modified in order to allow for the fact of human action and the way in which this influences the structure of feeling. It seems to me that one way in which this might be achieved is by modifying our understanding of the structure of feeling itself. Thus, it could be argued that, rather than assuming an overarching character, the structure of feeling is itself a shifting and dynamic process, the product of an ongoing struggle as individuals appropriate those cultural resources which are made available to them and work upon such resources to create new meanings. The stories that cultural commodities tell both to and about those who consume them - and which, in the case of contemporary youth may relate, for example, to sensibilities of style or the political message of a particular song or musical genre - are in part determined by the industries which produce such commodities.

This said, however, such stories are, in each instance, completed by particular groups of consumers, who take these cultural commodities and package them up into distinctive and 'localised' forms of collective identity, into distinctive 'structures of feeling'. In this way, the structure of feeling which characterises contemporary consumer society becomes less of an all embracing reality but serves instead as a form of cultural 'blueprint', setting up certain conventions of cultural meaning but leaving the final decision as to how such conventions are realised in the context of everyday social life to the actors themselves. In realising such conventions, however, individuals are in each instance guided by the knowledges

and sensibilities which frame the nature of everyday life as this is experienced in a given locality.

Throughout this study, we have seen examples of this localised process of creative adoption and adaptation in operation. Thus, in each of the four fieldwork chapters, social actors are seen to take cultural resources provided by the popular music and supporting industries and to use the commercially inscribed meanings attached to such resources as templates around which to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity. Although the resulting variations in musical significance obviously retain a sense of connectedness - hip hoppers possess essentially the same sensibilities of commercially generated style, musical taste and 'street-talk' irrespective of their location on the globe - at the same time they become infused with distinctive knowledges and sensibilities which originate from the particular region in which they are lived out. Such a process is an inevitable aspect of the use of mass cultural commodities in the formulation of what Chaney refers to as lifestyle "sites and strategies" (1996, p.91). According to Chaney, lifestyle 'sites' refer to the "physical metaphors for the spaces that actors can appropriate and control", while 'strategies' denote the "characteristic modes of social engagement, or narratives of identity, in which the actors concerned can embed the metaphors at hand" (ibid., p.92).

Through their use as symbolic markers in the lifestyle sites and strategies of individuals, mass cultural products, the primary cultural resources of contemporary social life, assume a form of dual significance. Thus, on the one hand, they are instantly recognisable as global commodities which connect with common stylistic and aesthetic preferences of individuals throughout the world, while on the other hand, their precise meanings become bound up with the local scenarios within they are appropriated and the local circumstances which they are used to negotiate. The result of this process is that the structure of feeling which underpins contemporary social life takes on a series of inflections which are highly localised but at the same time perfectly *natural* from the point of view of the actors involved. The structure of feeling in late modern society then, becomes simultaneously a way in which social actors understand their lifestyle choices as being bound up with particular global trends in music, fashion and so on, and a series of locally informed social discourses via which individuals live out their relations to such lifestyle choices on a day to day basis.

From an analytical point of view, this revised conceptualisation of the 'structure of feeling' seems to me to present a more adequate theoretical framework within which to situate studies of the relationship between youth and popular music than the approaches adopted by previous work. Indeed, the enhanced understanding which it offers of the ongoing dynamic that exists between local cultures and global music industries in determining the structures of meaning which become inscribed within popular music resources adds considerable weight to the argument which I have been concerned to pursue throughout this study, that is, that issues of youth style and musical taste cannot be reduced to an essentialist and deterministic interpretation. Thus, in demonstrating how musical meanings become, in each instance, bound up with particular local variations in the wider structure of feeling, I have shown more succinctly how the fashioning of such meanings is, on each occasion, a distinct social process.

It follows then, that any attempt to define the relationship between youth and popular music which fails to take account of the 'local' will, in doing so, also overlook the very processes which give rise to such a relationship in the first place. Indeed, as this study has continually served to demonstrate, the significance of popular music for youth cannot be realistically contextualised as *a relationship* but needs to be seen as a series of relationships formulated upon the bases of local knowledges and sensibilities. Moreover, as has also been demonstrated, even at the level of the local it becomes inherently difficult to apply a single narrative of musical meaning, popular music resources being subject to such a multiplicity of uses that such narratives quickly break down. The task of discerning popular music meanings for contemporary youth then, must in each case be conducted with continuing reference to and regard for the role of the local. The researcher must be prepared to accept the fact that such meanings will only be properly realised after a considerable amount of time has been invested in investigating particular social milieus of musical use. In the latter part of this concluding chapter I have attempted to provide what is, in my opinion, the necessary theoretical framework for future sociological studies which may also wish to address the role of the local in defining popular music's significance for contemporary youth.

## **Appendix**

### **Research design and methodology**

Prior to commencing the fieldwork for this study two things had particularly struck me in reading the various existing sociological accounts of youth culture and popular music. Firstly, how little of this work is backed up by empirical evidence, that is, interviews and discussions with young people themselves, and observations made through visiting clubs, venues and other locations (both formal and informal) in which popular music is appropriated and 'lived out' by young people on a day to day basis. Moreover, this failure to engage with young audiences, I discovered, was not merely restricted to those studies which, in adopting the CCCS view, assume that musical and stylistic preferences are structurally determined. On the contrary, in many of those studies which came after the CCCS and which suggest a more reflexive relationship between youth, style and musical taste, there is a similar 'disinterest' in the views and opinions of young people themselves. On the whole, there seems to be a wholesale reticence among sociologists of youth and popular music to meet with young people on their own terms and to allow them to talk frankly about their perceptions of popular music and its social significance for them. The second thing which struck me in reviewing the current literature was that in those few studies which do take a more empirical stance, this is generally accompanied by an extremely narrow focus of enquiry. Thus, a particular style or trend is selected for investigation, a handful of devotees interviewed and a rather one-dimensional conclusion arrived at, this being subsequently proffered as a quintessential reading of a particular genre or style.

My own experiences of consuming (and performing) popular music and of researching other enthusiasts has lead me to the conclusion that the relationship between youth and pop cannot be so neatly diagnosed. From the point of view of the young, popular music is a highly contentious cultural resource; if the consumption of popular music by young people enables them to articulate forms of hegemonic struggle against those individuals, groups and institutions which oppress them in various ways, then pop also ignites struggles between young people themselves, particularly concerning issues of authenticity. Such struggles can only be exposed by widening the picture normally created by social theorists of youth culture and popular music, that is, by illustrating something of the variety of musical and stylistic resources via which young people are able to express forms of identity and collective expression and by demonstrating the various themes and

issues which these are made to stand for. It is for this reason that I have chosen to cast the net fairly widely in this study - to consider four distinctive styles and various examples of the sensibilities which have grown up around them. Moreover, in doing so I have observed May's contention that ethnographic work "is supposed to be about the study of people, their interactions and environment" (1993, p.72). Thus, I have resisted the fairly standard sociological practice of placing interview and other fieldwork material in an 'Appendix' or 'Ethnography' section outside the main text of the study and have chosen instead to work this material into the body of my own theoretical analysis so that it becomes central to the study rather than simply hovering around its edges. At the same time, however, I appreciate fully that in the final analysis all "ethnographic discourses are necessarily 'partial truths' and the cultures they purport to describe are always to some extent the product of the researchers imagination" (Moore: 1993, p.4). Nevertheless, in presenting the study in this way, it is my hope that I have overcome some of the shortcomings which I identify with other ethnographic work on the relationship between youth and popular music and created a more accurate representation of this relationship.

## Research design

Having decided to go about my fieldwork in this way, that is, to research a number of musical genres and their respective audiences rather than concentrating upon a single example, I was immediately confronted with the problem of how best to balance what seemed set to be a lengthy fieldwork project with the demands of formulating my research findings into a satisfactory written account. Although I had done some preliminary observation and interviewing in my first year of studies, I began my fieldwork in earnest as I moved into my second year. By this time, I had also decided that I would try and complete my Ph.D. within the three year period of funding allocated to me by the ESRC. Consequently, I decided upon a working strategy where I wrote as I researched, rather than leaving the 'writing up' stage until the final year. This, I felt had two main advantages. Firstly, it meant that I could spend a longer period of time conducting field research - a period which I decided should last approximately twelve months, allowing both time to establish suitable contacts and to collect sufficient data. Secondly, it also allowed for my writing to be more directly influenced by the fieldwork process itself and for the chapters to develop, in part at least, as my empirical work progressed. Additionally, I also reasoned that this approach would allow me to remain more objective about my experiences in the field, or, to use a



phrase borrowed from Hobbs, would remove the danger of “going native (by) going academic” (1988, p.15).

I also had the problem of choosing a location for my fieldwork. My research hypothesis, with its emphasis upon the importance of locality in shaping manifestations of youth style and musical taste, suggested the need to focus upon one particular location (I had originally considered conducting the whole fieldwork project as an international comparative study, but later decided to restrict such comparative analysis to one chapter because of the impracticalities of spending lengthy periods of time abroad). Although I had initially thought about focussing upon a North East town, such as Sunderland or Middlesbrough, I eventually decided upon Newcastle upon Tyne as a study location. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, the city promised to yield more in terms of the variety of youth styles and trends which I was hoping to study during my fieldwork. Indeed, my experiences of playing with a group in Newcastle had given me something of an insight into the local youth scene in the city - thus, when I began to weigh up my options regarding fieldwork locations, it seemed to me that I had already gained a series of impressions concerning youth and popular music in Newcastle which seemed relevant to my work and upon which I could quickly build. Secondly, there was the simple question of accessibility. Having no car I was entirely reliant upon public transport. Direct buses and late night/early morning trains between Durham and Newcastle meant that it would be relatively easy to attend house parties and club nights, which often began at 11.00 p.m. and ended at 1.00 or 2.00 a.m. (or even later), and still be able to travel relatively easily back to Durham - something which was particularly important during the week as I also had some teaching commitments at the university.

The choice of Frankfurt am Main as my international fieldwork location was also a fairly logical decision. Prior to studying at Durham, I was based in Frankfurt for two years. While in the city, I worked for the Frankfurter Rockmobil, a form of mobile music school which uses local youth centres as a base and encourages young people from the different ethnic minorities within Frankfurt to collaborate in music-making activities. In doing so, the Rockmobil project aims to contribute to the improvement of ethnic relations in Frankfurt. While working with the Rockmobil, I was struck by the amount of interest among the young people who used the project's resources in hip hop. It was also clearly evident that the majority of the interest in hip hop came from young people associated with immigrant Gastarbeiter (guestworker) groups in Germany, particularly those

originating from Turkey and from Morocco and other parts of Northern Africa. Indeed, it was this particular experience which initially fired my interest in local representations of popular music styles and which motivated me to base my Ph.D. research upon this aspect of popular music and youth. Having produced a paper on the Frankfurt hip hop scene at an early stage in my studies, I then discovered a parallel local hip hop scene in Newcastle and realised that a study of these respective scenes would be the most effective way to introduce a comparative element into my work.

In selecting suitable interviewees and study groups for my field research I used a wide variety of methods. In her introduction to *Rock Culture in Liverpool* (1991), Cohen comments upon the way in which much useful information concerning Liverpool's popular music scene was gleaned from everyday conversations with local people such as "taxi-drivers, hairdressers, waitresses and waiters" (p.1). In many respects, I found that the same was true for my own study. Moreover, being a musician and playing regularly within the local Newcastle scene, I was constantly meeting or being introduced to musicians and music enthusiasts who gave me a great deal of background information about what types of music were popular in Newcastle, the clubs at which such musics were featured and specialist shops which sold particular types of music and were a focal point for particular types of music consumers. Such contacts also put me in touch with other groups and individuals who I was able to consult while conducting my research.

During the early stages of my fieldwork I also made contact with several initiatives established by City Challenge - these being Dance City - a dance project set up with a view towards encouraging young people in Newcastle to become involved in dance activities - and the Outreach Detached Centre in Elswick, west Newcastle - a 'drop-in' centre for young people who could use the centre's sports facilities or discuss problems with part-time teamers or qualified counsellors and youth workers. I also made contact with a similar project in the Percy Main district of Newcastle and with the Newcastle NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders) Music Project in Benwell, again in west Newcastle (although it was initially established to work with offenders, NACRO now offers skills training programmes for the long-term unemployed and school leavers). Without a doubt, my own background in social work and youth work was of considerable advantage to me in gaining access to these organisations. This said, however, on no occasion did I attempt to use this background in a way which suggested to these organisations that my research was policy orientated. Rather, I

made it quite clear during my initial consultations with each organisation that my research was academically centred and that the results would be primarily of use to scholars and university-based researchers.

Nevertheless, each of these organisations was extremely helpful and gave me initial assistance which proved to be crucial to the overall direction and development of my research. While not providing me directly with the information which I needed, they were able to put me in touch with, or direct me to, other sources which proved to be of invaluable worth in my research. Thus, through approaching Dance City, I made contact with a local hip hop enthusiast who proved to be an important source of information and a principle 'gatekeeper', giving me access to other hip hop enthusiasts and hip hop events in Newcastle. Similarly, in Percy Main I was introduced to several people who were able to put me in touch with urban dance music enthusiasts in Newcastle who, in turn, introduced me to the local urban dance music scene and helped me to gain a clearer picture of the latter's underlying political rationale. By attending various meetings and recreational sessions held at the Outreached Detached Centre in Elswick I was introduced to several young Asians who were bhangra enthusiasts (although, as I will go on to discuss in a moment, this particular aspect of my research presented its own problems of access). Similarly, one of the part-time sessional workers at the Elswick centre frequently organised or helped to organise informal urban dance music 'house parties' in Newcastle and acted as the 'gatekeeper' for my entry into this scene. Finally, in becoming acquainted with some of the young people at the NACRO music project, I was, in turn, introduced to the 'Benwell Floyd' - indeed, some of the group's members had formerly been involved, or were still involved with the NACRO music project.

I also gained valuable background information concerning the Newcastle music scene, and those who participated in it, by approaching the editing offices of several Newcastle-based music and youth centred magazines. Again, the staff of these magazines were incredibly generous with their time and helped me to focus the direction of my field research by giving me a thorough briefing on what styles of music were 'big' in Newcastle at the time and which clubs and venues catered for particular musical trends. Similarly, in June 1994, I attended a seminar at Newcastle's Tyneside Cinema entitled 'Boxpop: The Illustrated History of the Pop Video'. One of the seminar presenters had formerly worked on the production team of the Channel Four music programme 'The Tube', broadcast from Newcastle. I told him about my research during the seminar and contacted him on

various occasions for information as my fieldwork progressed. Another, useful contact also came to me through the medium of Channel Four. In the Summer of 1994, while watching the 'Channel Four Goes to Glastonbury' programme, I was introduced to Ferank, a Geordie poet and rapper, who gave an impromptu version of his rap "AA dee it coz aa can" (see chapter five) as an interviewer and camera crew made one of their regular forays into the festival audience. It was not until a year later when I was able to locate Ferank, after one of his raps had been published in a local magazine. Again, however, Ferank proved to be a valuable source of information, in addition to which he kindly agreed to let me reproduce some of his work in this study.

As far as the selection of interviewees and contacts in Frankfurt went, I could in many ways rely upon the network of young people which I had established through my work with the Rockmobil. In this respect, my former working partner Tom Müller was of invaluable assistance in helping me to arrange interviews and meetings with groups of young people in advance so that everything ran relatively smoothly during my short fieldwork visits to Frankfurt. The interviews with Frankfurt hip hop groups and enthusiasts featured in chapter five stem largely from contacts made while working with the Rockmobil. This said, however, during research visits to Frankfurt I also made contact with and interviewed groups and individuals who were unknown to me during the time when I lived and worked in the city. Similarly, I supplemented my established network of contacts by seeking information on the local hip scene from journalists, record labels and fanzines who I contacted during my visits to Frankfurt. All of the interviews conducted in Frankfurt were in German and have been subsequently translated into English.

## Methodology

My chosen research methodology was a triangulation of a number of different techniques. It was clear to me from the outset that the research would be qualitative rather than quantitative and that the bulk of my time in the field would be spent conducting interviews and observing the behaviour patterns of young people in music venues and clubs and at house parties, an activity which, I hoped, would also lead to informal conversations with young people as this would also yield useful information. Similarly, during the first year of my Ph.D. studies I had attended an ESRC research methods day school at Edinburgh University which centred upon the use of 'focus groups' in social research. I subsequently decided

to incorporate this method of research into my own work as a way of supplementing the information gleaned from interviews and participant observation. The use of focus groups, I felt, would be an effective way of cross-checking the results of 'one to one' interviews by seeing how the responses of interviewees altered when they became part of a larger discussion group. By allowing young people to discuss their feelings about popular music not only with me but among themselves, I reasoned, a more realistic picture would perhaps be created, reducing the sometimes 'distorting' effect of 'one to one' interviews, interviewees sometimes modifying their answers to 'fit in' with what they believe the interviewer wants to hear.

Nevertheless, before I attempted to put focus groups to use in my research I was anxious to try out the approach in test situation. To this end I contacted Durham Johnston Comprehensive School Sixth Form Centre and asked for eight volunteer students - four male and four female - to take part in a focus group session. This went well and so I decided to continue using focus groups in my research. The Durham Johnston session was the only time I used a self-selected focus group in my research. Thereafter, all groups were chosen by me and generally comprised people who I had met at clubs or concerts (with the exception of the Frankfurt-based research where my former Rockmobil colleague - acting on my instruction - assembled focus groups). I attempted at all times to obtain an even balance of male and female participants - this also applying to the selection of individual interviewees - although on many occasions this was not possible. Nevertheless, on no occasion did I conduct a focus group session which comprised exclusively of male or female respondents (with the exception of the research carried out into the Newcastle hip hop scene which, as I have pointed out in chapter five, was essentially male-centred).

In each of the focus group sessions which I conducted, although I established a fairly fixed agenda, I allowed the group to work through the discussion themes fairly loosely and would often deviate from the questions which I had planned if an interesting issue was raised by the group. I applied a similar philosophy to the 'one to one' interviews which I conducted in the course of my research. On each occasion I worked to a semi-structured interviewing agenda, again allowing interviewees to deviate from the intended course of questions as and when the information which they offered served to enhance my knowledge of particular themes and issues in ways which I had not previously anticipated.

In addition to those who took part in interviews and focus groups, there were several groups of individuals with whom I maintained more regular contact, attending club events, concerts and house parties with them (indeed in many instances those who I interviewed were also part of a group with whom I maintained more regular contact). In researching the Newcastle hip hop scene, I became friendly with a group of about six male hip hop enthusiasts and regularly attended hip hop events with them for a period of about three months. Similarly, I became acquainted with a group of about ten urban dance music followers (the size of the group fluctuating slightly), comprising roughly evenly of male and female devotees, and joined them on a series club outings over a five month period. I also maintained regular contact with the Benwell Floyd and various members of the group's audience. I attended around ten of the group's performances as well as meeting individual band and audience members for drinks and at house parties.

More problematic was the conducting of my research into bhangra in Newcastle. Prior to commencing this aspect of my research, I had been warned by an Asian community worker that trying to conduct interviews and focus groups with young Asians would be difficult because of the constraints placed upon their leisure time by their parents. This is especially the case for Asian girls and young women whose evening leisure time is restricted to the family home or to 'designated' Asian leisure or extra-curricular learning activities where they are constantly supervised by a teacher or youth/community worker. I also discovered fairly quickly that Newcastle's Asian population were extremely wary of strangers, especially those who acted in an 'official' or seemingly official capacity and who attempted to gain information from them about any aspect of their way of life. These related problems of access meant that I was forced to conduct most of my interviews and focus groups with young Asians around 'structured' events, such as the regular weekly meetings of the Black Youth Collective which was held at a comprehensive school in west Newcastle directly after the normal school day had ended and where I could be formally introduced by an Asian community worker. Similarly, I was granted access to a special training group which had been established for those young Asians in Newcastle who wished to contribute to the organisation of the 1995 Newcastle Mela.

At the suggestion of an Asian youth worker, who had frequent contact with Asian youth, I also prepared a set of questionnaires, requesting information about young Asians' attitudes towards bhangra, to be distributed around schools in West

Newcastle. The response rate to these questionnaires, however, was relatively poor and it was often the case that simple yes/no answers were given where I had indicated that a more detailed account should be given. Subsequently, I decided against the use of questionnaires and attempted to gain as much information as possible via direct contact with young Asians, despite the problem of gaining such contact. The problem was, however, resolved, at least to some extent, by the approaching summer which meant that I was able to participate in a number of day trips, organised by the Black Youth Collective, for young Asians and attend outdoor events such as the Middlesborough and Newcastle Melas and the Stockton Festival, the latter attracting many young Asians from Newcastle because of the live bhangra music which was featured. By attending such events in the company of an Asian youth worker, who agreed to act as a gatekeeper, I was able to spend more time talking to young Asians, thus gaining the supplementary information which I needed to complete my research on bhangra in Newcastle.

For the most part all of the interviews and focus groups which I conducted were recorded on a small cassette machine - to be transcribed at a later date. On each occasion, I asked interviewees and focus group participants before starting the sessions if they were prepared for me to use a tape recorder. In almost every instance there were no objections, although I did make the point of stating that if, at any point during the interview/focus group session, participants wished for the tape machine to be switched off then I would do so. I also explained to the research participants that, although I may subsequently wish to use their comments and observations in the text of my thesis and other research papers, I would observe a code of confidentiality by changing the names of those who had taken part in the research. I also ensured them that the research material would be used only for academic purposes, that is the writing of papers and the production of a thesis.

On the few occasions when I was refused permission to use my tape recorder I made notes of the sessions as I conducted them - again with the permission of the respondents. This, I found did not detract from the interview process - indeed, I quickly found that I was able to write down notes in a form of shorthand (these being written out in full later) which enabled me continue engaging in discussion as I jotted down my notes. On those occasions when I made use of participant observation, I made sure that the results of this were written up as quickly as possible thereafter. Although I did not make any effort to conceal my role as a social researcher at any time - something which created interest rather than

indifference or hostility among those young people who I was researching - I tried at all times to blend in as much as possible with the other individuals present in particular research settings. I did, however, take a pen and several sheets of paper with me to such research settings (these being easily carried in the back pocket of jeans or the breast pocket of a shirt) should the need arise to record any particularly important information/events in the research setting (in which case I would try to do this as discreetly as possible, for example in the foyer or cloakroom of a club, or an unused room at a house party). In reality, however, most of my jotted notes were made either on the train or bus returning home after conducting research, or before going to sleep.

In total, I conducted fifty seven 'one to one' interviews and twenty three focus group sessions during the process of collecting empirical information for this study. In general, interviewees and focus group participants took part in only one formally organised session, although, as I have previously pointed out, I had regular contact to many of these individuals on a more informal basis during the course of my research. Some of those young people involved in Newcastle's urban dance music scene took part in multiple interviews/focus groups, as did members of the Benwell Floyd. The interviews and focus groups which I conducted were fairly evenly spread over the various musical genres and attendant styles which I consider in the work. Similarly, over a period of ten months I spent, on average, two to three evenings a week engaged in participant observation work at pubs, clubs, live music venues or house parties. From this work came introductions to, or chance meetings with, other individuals who provided me with additional information over drinks, or at their houses/flats after late-night events or all-night house parties. On no occasion was my personal safety threatened during the course of my research. Likewise, my lifelong abstention from drugs was at no point challenged, despite the fact that drug use - particularly soft drugs such as cannabis and new designer drugs such as ecstasy - were an accepted part of many of those settings which I entered during the course of conducting my research.



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